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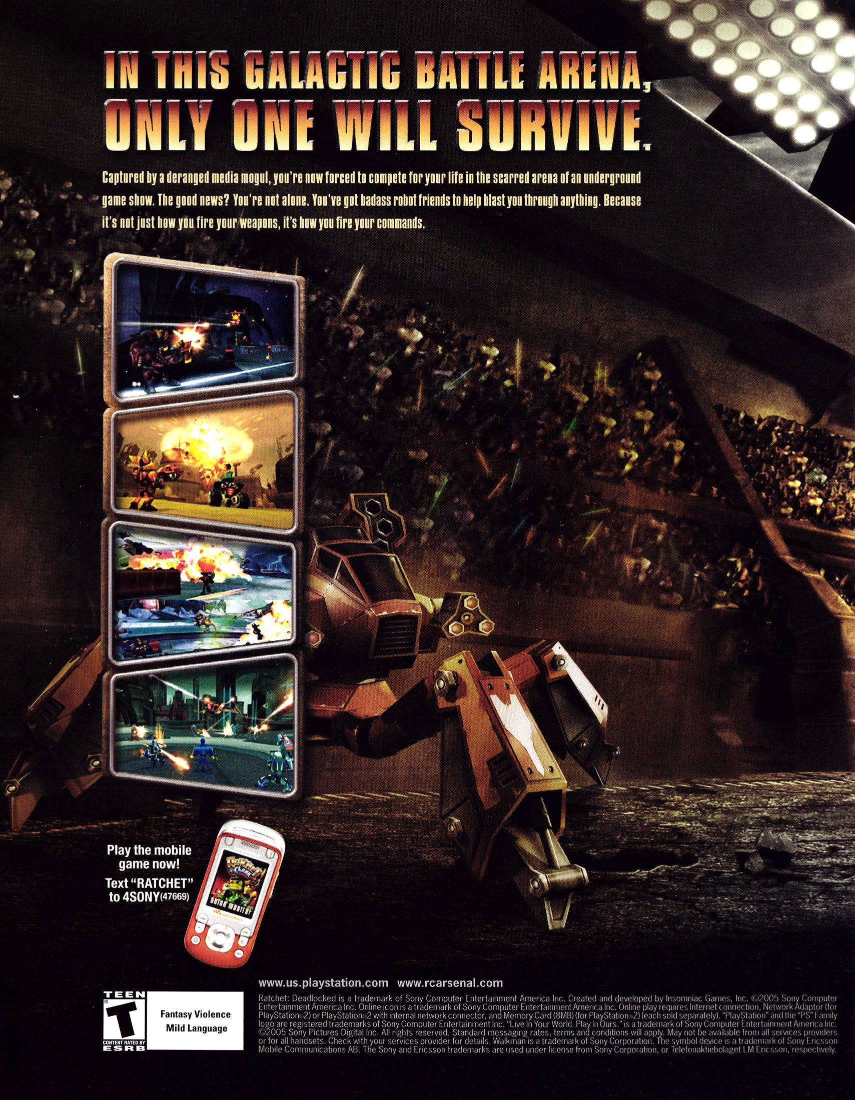

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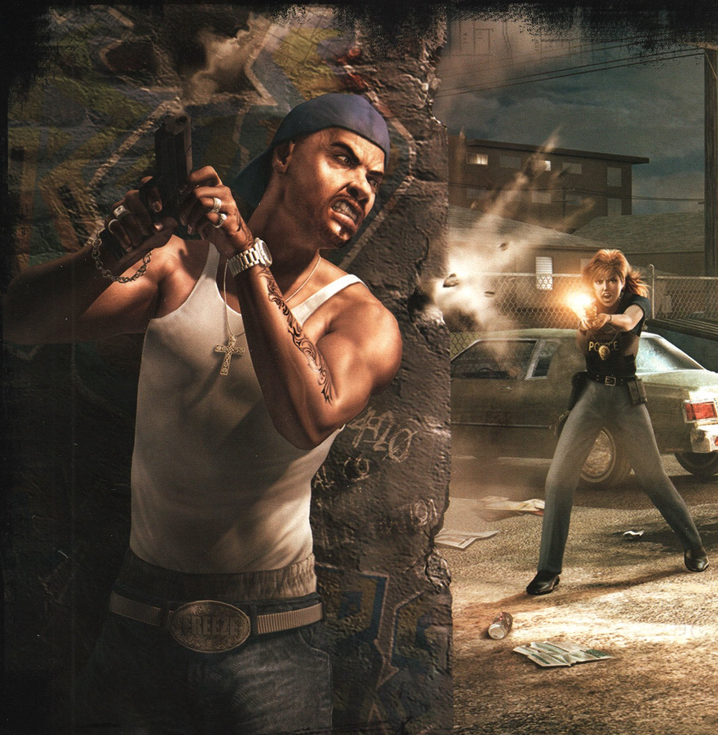

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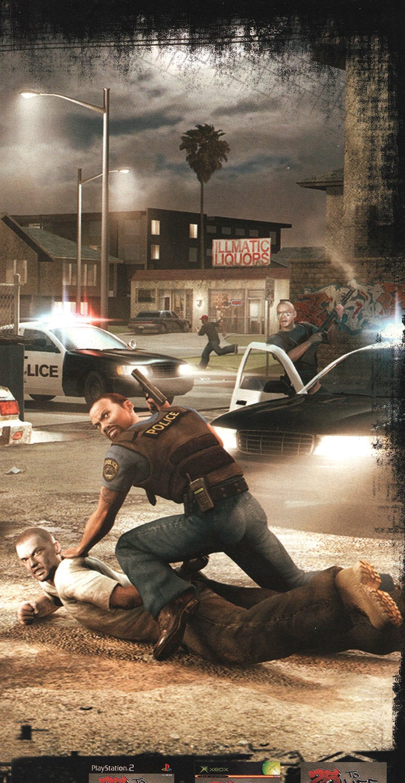
"PROTECT SOCIETY AS THE BOYS IN BLUE OR JOIN A GANG AND WAGE WAR ON IT" - PSM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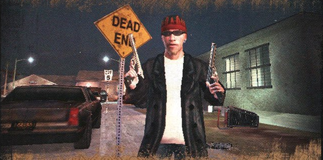

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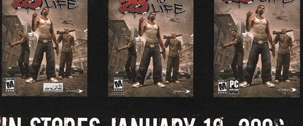
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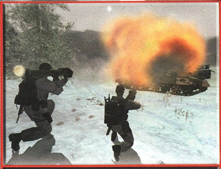
The deadliest hotspots: urban, mountain, jungle

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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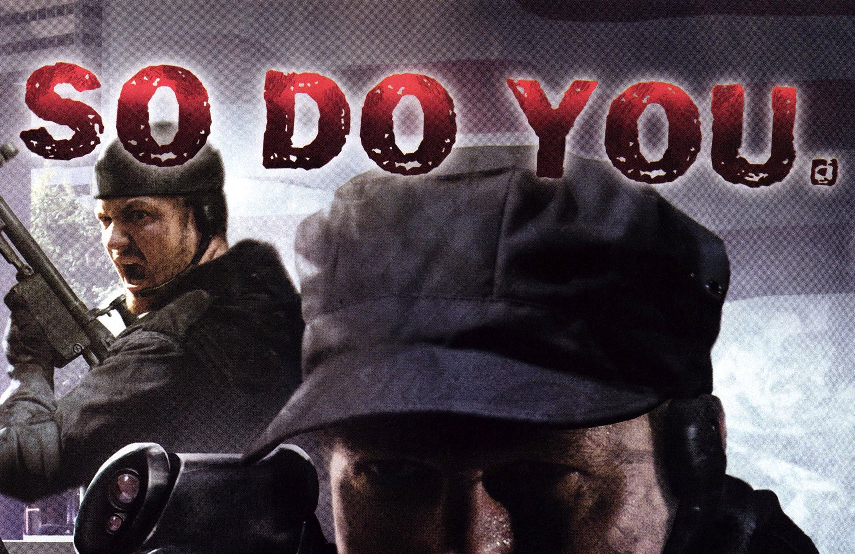

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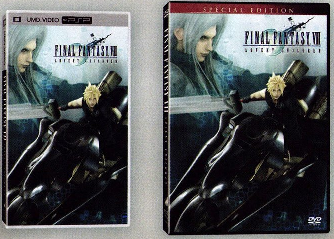

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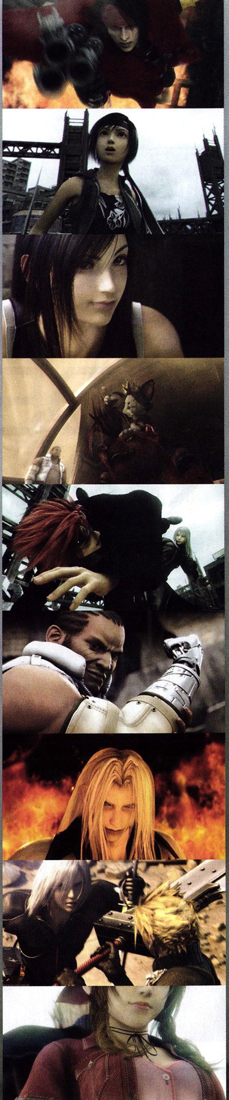

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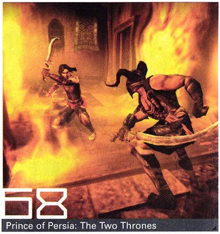

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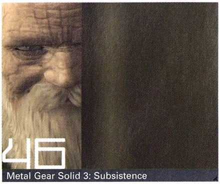

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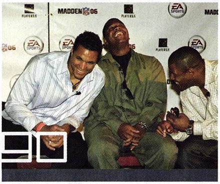
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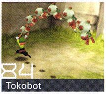
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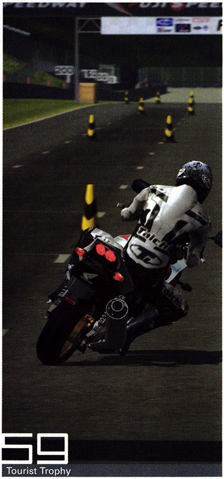
Not enough *Metal Gear* to satisfy your craving for Snake? Then head on over to metalgear.1UP.com for more video, retrospectives, and interviews than your little head will be able to comprehend. Start by watching a second all-new interview with Mr. Kojima. When you're finished with that, head on over to a special-edition Retro/Active, which traces a time line of all the events from the *Metal Gear* games. Next check out the comprehensive previews detailing all known information on the three-system trifecta of *Metal Gear Acid 2, Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence,* and *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

Also stay tuned to www.1UP.com for all the latest info on Sony's PS3 announcements and displays at January's Consumer Electronics Show. Check it out for the latest trailers and information.

And every Friday, get a peek into what life is like as a videogame journalist with the weekly episode of *The 1UP Show*, which is conveniently located at the1UPshow.1UP.com.

Viva la Internet!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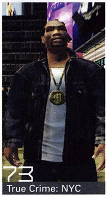
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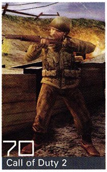
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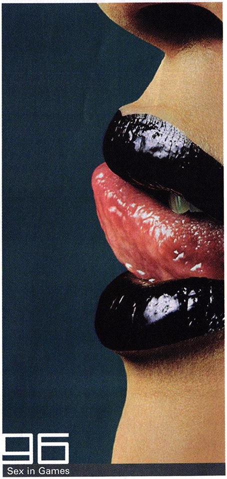
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Sex in Games

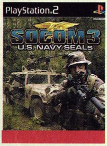
ON THE DVD

YOUR TICKET TO RIDE

WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

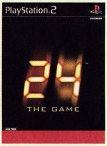
There's only one magazine that can provide you with the awesomeness of PlayStation 2 demos—and that's the *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*, which you're holding right here in your hands. This month, test-drive the latest installment of one of the most popular series for the PlayStation 2 when you play *SOCOM 3*. Get a look inside Jack Bauer's head in the world of *24*. Try the intense combat of *Battlefield 2*, or take to the skies in *Heroes of the Pacific*. And then go for a little face-off of soccer goodness with both *FIFA Soccer 06* and *Winning Eleven 9 International*.

PLAY IT!



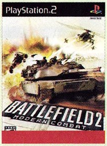
SOCOM 3

SOCOM just keeps getting better. Lock and load with this single-player sampler showcasing the game's strategic muscle to see how sweet it is.



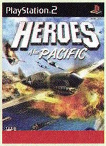
24: THE GAME

CTU field agent Jack Bauer answers your burning questions concerning what happened between seasons two and three of the TV series *24*.



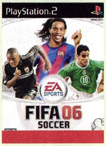
BATTLEFIELD 2: MODERN COMBAT

Check out a sample of the single-player action in *Battlefield 2*, complete with a variety of vehicles and weapons.



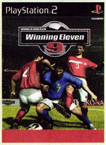
HEROES OF THE PACIFIC

Calling all World War II aviation buffs—load this demo, take to the skies, and defend Pearl Harbor in this high-flying demo.



FIFA SOCCER 06

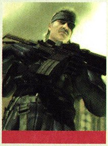
This month we put two of the most powerful soccer games on one disc for you to sample. Which game will be king? You make the call!



WINNING ELEVEN 9 INTERNATIONAL

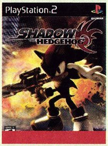
Someone told us, "*Winning Eleven es y sera por siempre el mejor simulador de fútbol del planeta!*" Do you agree?

WATCH IT!



METAL GEAR SOLID 4

Catch a glimpse into the next generation with the infamous Solid Snake in the upcoming *Metal Gear Solid 4*. Yes, it is as good as you've heard.

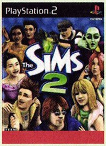


SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

Move over Sonic, Shadow is here with guns blazing. His mission: Obtain chaos emeralds and learn the secrets of his past.

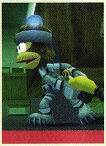
SOUL CALIBUR III

If you haven't picked up this king of all fighting games, then do yourself a favor: Check out the opening cut-scene and ask yourself why.



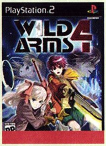
THE SIMS 2

Live out your fantasies or play God? The choice is yours. Hear all about it straight from the folks who made the new *Sims 2* game.



APE ESCAPE 3

Find out what's in store for you in the latest *Ape Escape* game. (Hint: The relationship with the *Metal Gear Solid* team continues.)



WILD ARMS 4

Take a peek at the next chapter in the popular *Wild Arms* series, including lots of details on the game's story and characters.

OMG MGS4

TRAILER GOLD

PlayStation
101

Oh snap! The *Metal Gear Solid 4* trailer, in all of its glory, is on the disc. This is the full, real deal, better than the crappy downloads of incredibly small size you get off the Internet. It not only runs at 60 frames per second with full subtitles, but also has the often cut off segment at the end, during which Snake and Otacon talk about the powers of the Cell processor (complete with footage of both the ducks-in-the-sink tech demo and the *Killzone* PS3 trailer). This is the definitive version of the *MGS4* trailer.

The trailer is pretty self-explanatory, and we won't spoil too much of it (for the seven of you who didn't download a shaky-cam version off of metalgearduder.com). Anyway, there's not much more we can say after the extensive trailer-dissecting craziness we did in the PS3 Watch article for Issue #99. Facts and speculation that have shown up since the trailer first aired are as follows: The wee robot that Otacon uses to talk to Snake looks a lot like a Metal Gear Mk. II (from Kojima's Sega CD game *Snatcher*). Also, Kojima admitted to liking the phrase "Solid Eye System" that *Metal Gear Acid* director Shinta Nojiri came up with and basically swiped the term for use in *MGS4*. The Metal Gears are rumored to be called "Gekkou" (Japanese for "moonlight") this time around, and if you pay attention, you'll notice that there are no civilians in this trailer, despite the setting being an actual city instead of a military base like in previous games. This is a subtle hint that the effects of war have screwed up the planet so much that even cities are unsafe from its effects. But enough jibber jabber—just pop this disc into your PS2 and revel in the PS3 goodness.

PlayStation
ISSUE 102

#102

COMING NEXT MONTH

PLAY IT!

TEEN TITANS
SHADOW HEARTS: FROM THE NEW WORLD
ONIMUSHA: DAWN OF DREAMS
SONIC RIDERS
TOCA RACE DRIVER 3
DRAKENGARD 2
STATE OF EMERGENCY 2
EYETOY: OPERATION SPY
SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

WATCH IT!

NBA BALLERS: PHENOM
APE ESCAPE 3
DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES
FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR: TEN HAMMERS

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Lead Programmers William Bohan, Ron Midthun, Avery Lodato
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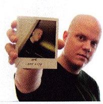
THE OPM FAMILY

JOY DIVISION

TOM BYRON wants everyone to know that 2005 has ended on a high note for him. He's incredibly jazzed about the Hideo Kojima feature (a real human on the cover of a videogame magazine? Preposterous!), he's having a blast playing through the most excellent *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Game of the Year contender!), and he's made the playoffs in his fantasy football league, even after the loss of Donovan McNabb. Can life get any better than this? Well, duh: The PlayStation 3 is coming in 2006. W00T!

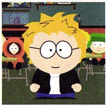
DANA JONGEWAARD has been trying out her hip-hop persona in the office, and has been oblivious to the ridicule and pleas of her coworkers to stop already and go back to being the hopelessly uncool person that she always has been and always will be.



JOE RYBICKI suffered a catastrophic hard drive failure at home this month. You know, the hard drive that had all of his utterly irreplaceable writings, pictures, and music on it. So much of his memory was locked in that machine that now he can't remember who he is. Can you help?

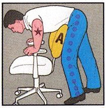
THIERRY NGUYEN isn't logged in to the real world anymore. He enjoys the comforts of *World of WarCraft*. Dana can't use e-mail or IM to contact him, and instead has to log on to the Dethecus server and message "Nimanranch" for communication.

GIANCARLO VARANINI is really starting to get excited about PlayStation 3 stuff. Having seen some of the models in *Lair*, he has decided that fake dragons are better than all of those real dragons that live down the street from him. No offense, real dragons.



LOGAN PARR has been watching way too much *South Park* lately. He recites dialogue from the show and interrupts meetings by asking, "Who killed Kenny?!" Recently, we have noticed he is even starting to look like he actually belongs on the show.

RYAN VULK has a message for the anonymous editor (**cough** Scooter! **cough**) that wrote this month's Game Envy piece: "*FFXI* junkie Melkor invites the *WOW* masses to the *FFXI* world, where they'll finally get to put on their Pull-Ups training pants."



ALEJANDRO CHAVETTA followed through on his inclination to take full advantage of an open bar. The end result of this? He was forced to work in this position for several days after the annual company holiday party. Thank you, tequila, whiskey, vodka, and gin....

EXTENDED FAMILY

JAMES MIELKE discovered, in his visit with Mr. Kojima, that the two of them share a lot of musical tastes. However, even Kojima was not a big enough fan of the Pet Shop Boys that he was part of a fan club.
milkman.1UP.com

CHRIS KOHLER found *Ape Escape 3* to be helpfully therapeutic in working through a traumatic childhood episode in which a monkey attacked him in a pet store. Take that, you dirty monkeys.
kobunheat.1UP.com

ROBERT ASHLEY comes from Texas, where they grow their game reviewers tall and snarky. He also makes music in not one, but two different bands. He's multifunctional like that.
robertashley.1UP.com

GREG SEWART hails from the same country cold comes from: Canada. He worked for *OPM*'s sister mag *Electronic Gaming Monthly* for years before joining, and then leaving, the game-design community.
stewy.1UP.com

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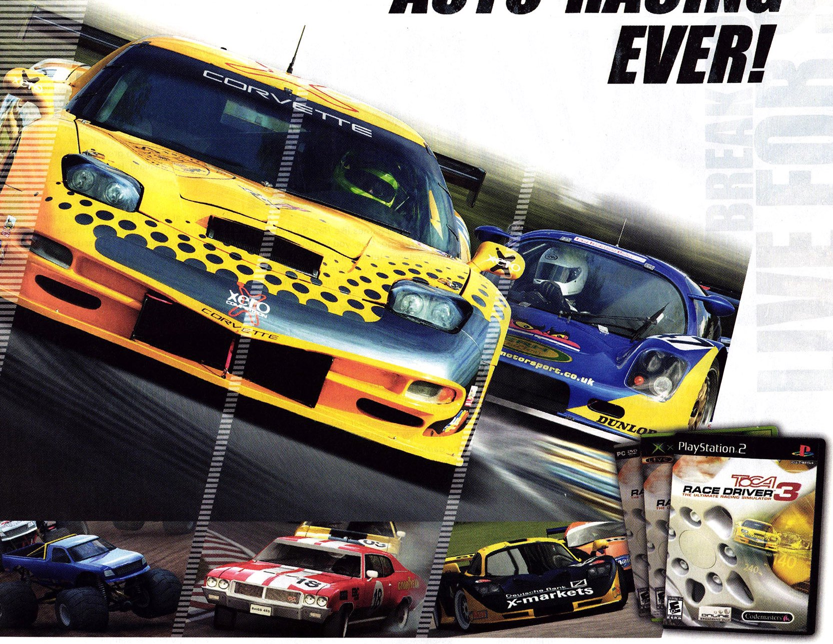

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INPUT

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE...OR WHATEVER

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PHONE CALL OF THE MONTH

"Hi. How ya doing? Just a reader of your magazine, and I just got done reading this 100 games of the PlayStation systems that you must have played before you die [Issue #100], and I cannot believe that you would not put *Legend of Dragoon* on that list. Or I can't believe that you would have only one *Legacy of Kain* game on that list, maybe not even the best one of them all. That's really wrong. And you're bad."
Unidentified

DRAGOONIES

Your "Essential 100" was a wonderful idea for the 100th issue. But I was shocked to find that a certain two games were not listed: *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Legend of Dragoon*. You can argue with me about *FFVIII* and you might win, but *Legend of Dragoon* should be on the list. Last time I checked it was No. 1 on a list of games that most gamers demand a sequel of. All in all, I think you did a pretty darn good job on your list, and congratulations on your 100th issue!
Jonathan Martin
via e-mail

First off, let me thank you for printing this wonderful magazine for PlayStation *otakus* like myself everywhere. Now let's get down to business. In your "Essential 100" list, megakudos for including games like *Rez*, *Soul Blade*, and *Gran Turismo*. Alas, you forgot some of the best, yet very underappreciated, games out there. How can you leave out games like *DBZ: Budokai*, *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, *Xenosaga*, and lastly, *Legend of Dragoon*! That game is just as good if not better than *Final Fantasy VII*! Besides, *FFVII* is waaaay too overrated. Peace out!
Bobby Wilbraham
via e-mail

Jonathan and Bobby, yours are just a few of the letters, e-mails, and calls we received admonishing us for not including Legend of Dragoon *in the Essential 100. In the end we felt that while* Legend of Dragoon *is in fact a fine game with the most luscious graphics to be found on the PlayStation, it just falls short of being a great RPG—or at least not as great as the ones that did make the list. Jonathan is right:* Legend of Dragoon *continues to be the game* OPM *readers feel is most deserving of a follow-up.*

ブシドーブレード
BUSHIDO BLADE™

BLADEFUNNER

Seeing the list of PS1 games on the "Essential 100," I decided to dig out some of my old PS1 games and found *Bushido Blade*. It was the first game I got for my PlayStation, and I just started playing it again. I forgot how much fun the game was.
Tahake Mitchell
via e-mail

DEPARTMENT OF COLLECTIONS

Congratulations on reaching 100 issues. This means that I reached a milestone also. Although I decided to part ways with your first 12 issues of *OPM* on eBay, I [have kept] my *OPM* demo discs. That's right, I managed to collect all 100 of them, and I've attached a couple of pictures to prove it. Again, congratulations, and keep up the great work. One more thing: Those were two great interviews [with Kaz Hirai and J Allard, Issue #100].
Otis Harville
via e-mail

Hey, guys at *Official PlayStation Magazine*. Just wanted to say happy 100th issue. I've been with you since the first issue; as you can see, I'm running out of room on my wall for your demo discs. Enclosed is a photo of my homage to your mag. Once again, keep up the good work. Happy 100th issue.
Jeff Yuettner
via e-mail

NO, NO, NO, NO...THANK YOU!

I'll never forget when it all started. The month: October. The year: 1997. Browsing a newsstand for some PlayStation reading material, my brother brings home a treasure:

Brother: Hey, check this out.

Me: What is it?

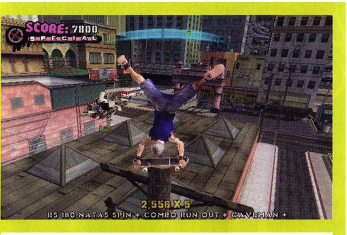
Brother: A new PlayStation magazine. It comes with a demo disc.

Me: Wha?! Load it up right now!

While my brother sampled the playable demos of *Fighting Force* (crash, bang, pow!), *Ace Combat 2* (ooooh), *PaRappa the Rapper* (yay!), and *Intelligent Qube* (wow), I stood there in front of the television set, transfixed, clutching your premier issue (maybe it was the cover art of a scantily clad Motoko Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell* that did it for me). As I flipped through the pages, I knew I was holding something special (no, not Motoko). I was no longer being bored by the bland photographs, low-grade artwork, terrible articles, and asinine filler material other videogame magazines had ruined me with. There was no dodgy info or vague videogame rumors. *OPM* was something different, something new, something worth reading. *OPM* respects its readers!

GAMERS ARE TALKING ABOUT

STRAIGHT FROM THE OPM MESSAGE BOARDS


SCORE: 7800
SPECIAL
2,556 X 5
BS 180 NATAS SPIN + COMBO RUN OUT + CAVEMAN +

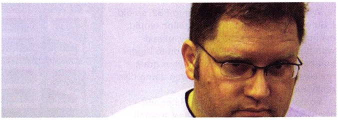
WE THAWT WE THAW

Respen bravely jump-starts the *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* discussion: "I really like this game. I love the story, characters, etc., and the skating is still fun. The bikes are fun, too, because of the different control scheme. There are only a couple of things I didn't like that much. The game is way too easy. Also, I don't really like how there are corporate sponsors everywhere you look."

ChickenNext weighs in: "I would like to officially claim my title as the biggest *Tony Hawk* game fan on the *OPM* boards, and I had mixed reactions to *THAW*. It's a great game, sure, but it doesn't last. And as you said, Sick difficulty is ridiculously easy."

SlayerJake adds, "Overall it is a great game, but I'm so damn tired of *Tony Hawk* games that it got boring fast. If they would change the gameplay completely and make the skating superrealistic with great physics and graphics, then maybe I would try it again, but right now I'm kind of like, 'Meh.'"

But **ChickenNext** wonders: "Where the hell are all the pros? Even worse, WHERE THE HELL WAS TONY?! IT'S HIS FREAKIN' GAME!"



FROM ME TO YOU

Dear Everyone: You'll recall that last issue we did a bit of a makeover of the magazine's design and also reorganized a few parts. So far, your response has been very positive. Thanks, everyone.

On the very last page of this issue, Joe Rybicki has started a new column called "PS"—clever, eh? Joe, as longtime readers know, has been on the editorial staff from day 1, and he was here in the before time, when the mag was known as *PSX*. Like Obi-Wan Kenobi, Joe is wise, fights only for the side of good, and has seen just about everything. Read his column now, and then come back. I'll wait.

Ah, you're back. Good. I also hope you notice what we're doing with our interviews. They're bigger, more featurelike, and focus properly on the people, not the products, of PlayStation gaming. No one is more excited over the Hideo Kojima interview than I am. He is truly the master, and I hope you all enjoy what he has to say.

And in this space each month, I, or one of the illustrious *OPM* staffers, will answer your questions, comment on the issue (and the issues), or start a fight. You never know what will happen.

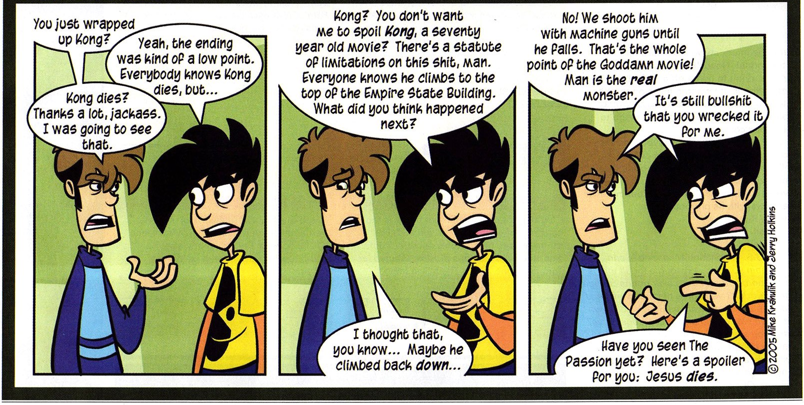
Take care.

Tom Byron

Special to Rory: Wikipedia.org is right about Kojima's affection for the seminal new wave band Joy Division. He's also a huge fan of New Order, the band that resulted from JD front man Ian Curtis' suicide. I'm a JD and NO fan, too. I guess that makes me, you, and Kojima soul mates (not that there's anything wrong with that).

PENNY ARCADE

PENNY-ARCADE.COM


You just wrapped up Kong?
Yeah, the ending was kind of a low point. Everybody knows Kong dies, but...
Kong dies? Thanks a lot, jackass. I was going to see that.
Kong? You don't want me to spoil *Kong*, a seventy year old movie? There's a statute of limitations on this shit, man. Everyone knows he climbs to the top of the Empire State Building. What did you think happened next?
I thought that, you know... Maybe he climbed back *down*...
No! We shoot him with machine guns until he falls. That's the whole point of the Goddamn movie! Man is the *real* monster.
It's still bullshit that you wrecked it for me.
Have you seen The Passion yet? Here's a spoiler for you: Jesus *dies*.
©2005 Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins

When *OPM* made the change to PS2, so did I. Sure, I was sad that my PlayStation would eventually be laid to rest, but hey, paired with the PlayStation 2, *OPM* was on to bigger and better things! Every month, your great reviews, credible articles, and swag demo disc really fueled my PS2 hunger.

So here I am now, 100 issues later and about 50 PS2 games richer (I know, a small collection compared to most people's, but I'm happy). I haven't missed a single issue of *OPM*. Issues #2 to #99 are pressed neatly on my bookshelf with their demo discs deserving their very own CD binder. Issue and disc #100 will soon join them. Where's Issue #1, the one that started it all? I have a special place for it. I had it matted and framed with its demo disc, and it hangs on my office wall, a constant reminder of my love for *OPM*.

Thank you, *OPM*.

PyroJames
Toronto, Ontario

IX-NAY ON THE XBOX-HAY

I've noticed that in the last few months, little bits of Xbox info have been sneaking into *OPM* (*Official PLAYSTATION Magazine* for those of you who didn't know). I've been subscribing for years, starting with Issue #17, and I'm normally not one to complain, but the new issue [*OPM* #100] with the huge four-page interview with J Allard took it just a step too far. Now, I'm not saying that I don't like J or trying to come off as a fanboy. What I am saying is, if I wanted news on the Xbox or to hear what Allard has to say, I would subscribe to [an Xbox magazine] or go to TeamXbox.com.

Do you go to your local Toyota dealer to find out info on the new lineup of Fords? No? Well then, I don't expect to be looking through a magazine, which I subscribe to, that is devoted to PlayStation and see Xbox news or interviews with its promoters.

Davidde Ricci
via e-mail

Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine is and will remain your No. 1 resource for all things PlayStation, and nothing's ever gonna change there. But don't you agree that interviewing J Allard (in the same issue as Sony's very own Kaz Hirai) was a bold and courageous move? Didn't you see value in it as an important and relevant commentary on the challenges of next-gen gaming? Wouldn't you like to see Sony adopt an Xbox Live model for the PS3? No? Um, OK.

READER REVIEWS

NEED FOR SPEED UNWANTED

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

WHAT YOU SAID

I am a huge racing-game fan. I have been playing racing games ever since *Enduro* on the Atari 2600. My favorite all-around racing game is *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2*. It's got a decent selection of cars, varied track locales, and a damage option, and it's fun to play (sorry, *Gran Turismo 4* fans, racing for hours on one race is not fun). When I heard the news that EA was releasing a new game in the franchise that combines *Hot Pursuit* and *Underground*, I couldn't wait to play it. But alas, when I fired it up, I was disappointed. Not to say it isn't good, but it's just *Underground* in the daytime with cops. The chases are fun, and the cop AI is much improved (to the point of frustration), but I am sick of this urban, customize-your-car-to-the-point-of-abomination, street-racing-for-pink-slips crap that most racers are striving for. Hopefully EA can refresh the series on PS3, but for now I think I'll pop in *Hot Pursuit 2*. | Deekerd77

READER SCORE **2.5**|5

WHAT WE SAID

"My biggest disappointment by far is the total lack of online play on the PS2. For some reason, on consoles only the Xbox and Xbox 360 versions of *Most Wanted* feature an online mode. That's just lame."

OPM SCORE **4.5**|5

THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO

WHAT YOU SAID

Man, I was just breathless when I played *The Matrix: Path of Neo*. If I had to, I would rate this game 4.5 out of 5 because the gameplay is amazing. But the developers at Shiny could have put some better graphics in this game—it would have been better to wait until the PS3 came out. I enjoy the smooth controls. (Spoiler alert!) I especially enjoyed the part when the Wachowskis came out and introduced the final boss battle. But all in all this is a great game; the controls are easy to learn, and the moves that you can do are amazing! Shiny has done it again, and you must buy or rent *Path of Neo* because you are all the chosen ones to play this game! | Matt Cochrane

READER SCORE **4.5**|5

WHAT WE SAID

"Despite all this [terrible lock-on system, framerate problems, clipping], *Matrix* fans will be hooked. For everybody else, it's worth a peek, but this path isn't meant for you."

OPM SCORE **3**|5

Want to have your say about a recent game? Think you can do better than us? Send your review (don't forget the score!) to opm@ziffdavis.com with the subject "READER REVIEW."

1UP.com

BLOG OF THE MONTH

"My Id: Oh. My. God. That's Kimi Matsuzaki. Kimi Matsuzaki, the lady and ruling queen of 1UP. You have to go say something, anything, to her!

My Superego: Are you nuts!? You can't just talk to Kymmiko like you're some kind of famous person! She probably has some nimrod walking up to her in public every single day. Just keep walking, fanboy, keep walking.

(At this point, Kimi noticed me staring at her, which caused me to freeze up on the spot and lamely try my best to look cool and inconspicuous.)

Id: Oh, man! Kymmiko just looked at you! Wave at her or something!

Superego: No, you idiot! Just run!

Id: No, no, act cool! Just keep taking pictures of the games!

(So I continued my original mission of taking pictures. I made sure to not take a picture of Kymmiko for the simple reason that I am not some kind of tabloid photographer, nor will I ever be. I don't need that kind of karma.)"

MaKenLi Noburu
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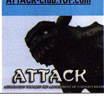

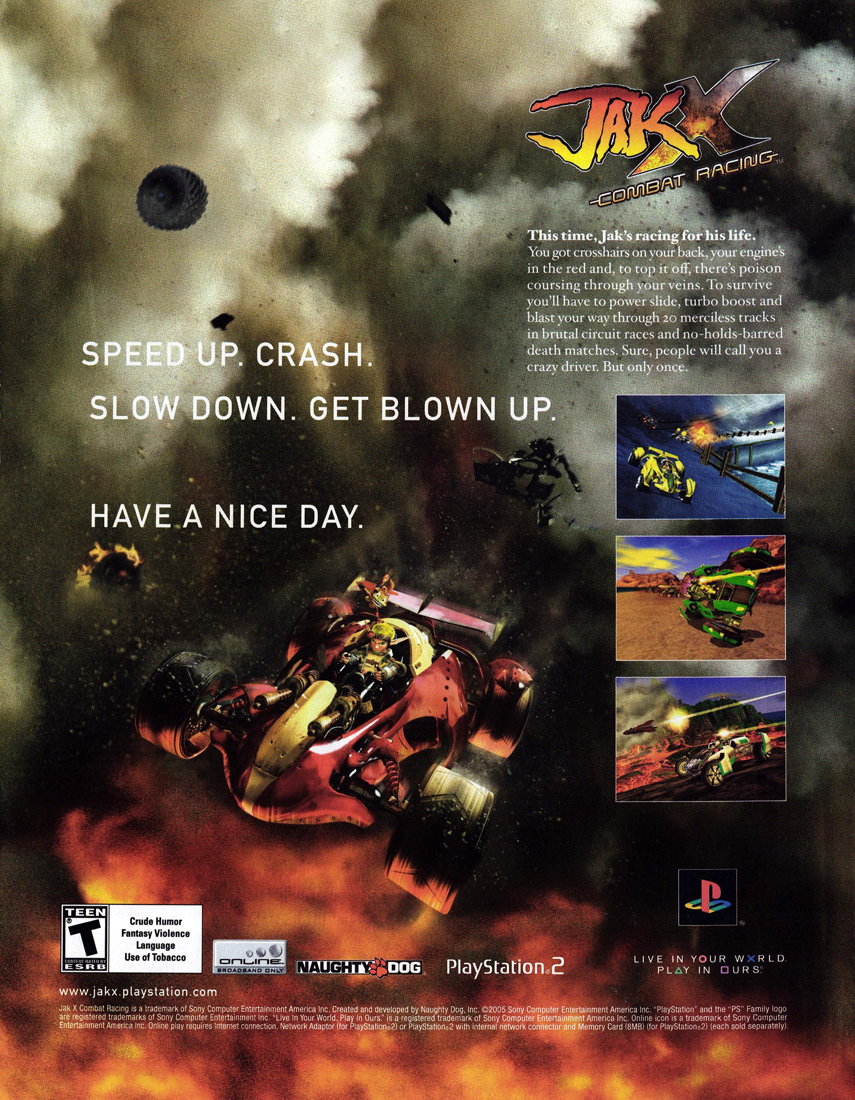
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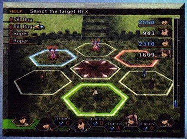
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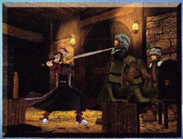

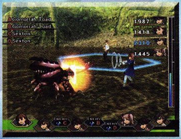
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HYPE

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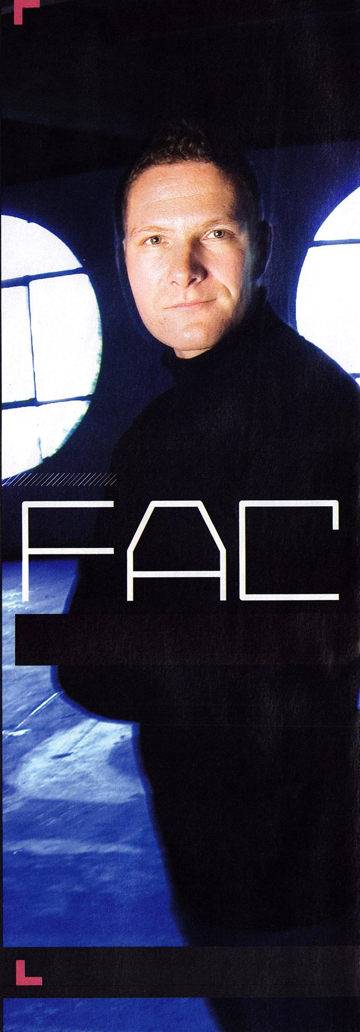

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FACTOR 3
Julian Eggebrecht, president and creative director, poses with Thomas Engel and Holger Schmidt, who are original members of the Factor 5 team and are currently the director of technology and the director of development, respectively.

TORED IN

HOW FACTOR 5 WENT FROM BUILDING ITS OWN DEVELOPMENT KITS TO BECOMING A PREMIER PLAYSTATION 3 DEVELOPER

Photos by Michael Sexton

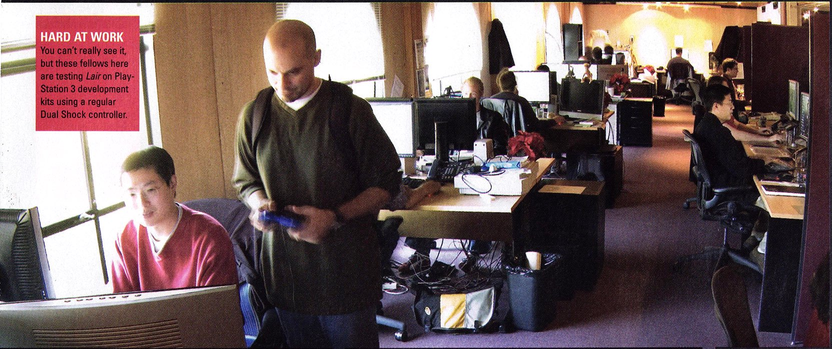
MOVING ON UP

The office building at Lucas Valley Road—which houses developer Factor 5?—looks fairly inconspicuous from the outside. The cement exterior conveys the sense that there are a bunch of accountants or desk jockeys inside, whittling away at stacks upon stacks of forms and other paperwork. Little would you know that it's quite the opposite on the inside, where a team of nearly 100 people—including programmers, artists, designers, and other talented individuals—is working on one of the most high-profile games for the PlayStation 3 launch: *Lair*. The crazy thing is, *Lair* isn't getting all this attention simply because of its subject matter or because of some license that would automatically guarantee it massive amounts of hype. No, *Lair* is high profile because Factor 5 is high profile.

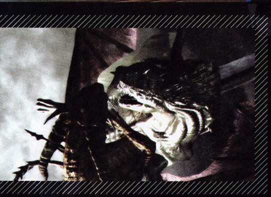
This is the same developer that ostensibly got the most out of the GameCube hardware—or at least more than most other developers—with its very first game—a launch game, in fact, by the name of *Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader*. It's the same game that propelled Factor 5 into the spotlight and made the company synonymous with technical wizardry. How many other developers do you know who produce work that gets compared side by side with that of Industrial Light & Magic?

But it wasn't always this way. As with most developers, Factor 5's foundation was laid in garage development, when the company started out as Factor 3. "We started in high school in the late '80s. We wanted to do something cool on computers because we couldn't really do anything on consoles at the time," says Julian Eggebrecht, president and creative director of Factor 5. "This was all in Germany, and we started work on the Commodore Amiga. There weren't any games specifically written for the hardware—they were all shoddy ports. We met on the weekends and all huddled together in a living room and [got to work on these games]."

One of the team's first projects was a clone of the popular shooter *R-Type*, but it would quickly move on to more ambitious projects, such as *Turrican*, that were influenced by a number of other popular games at the time. "It was partly influenced by *Metroid*, but the main



HARD AT WORK
You can't really see it, but these fellows here are testing *Lair* on PlayStation 3 development kits using a regular Dual Shock controller.



THE ART OF LAIR

We had a chance to see the real-time demo of *Lair* running up close, and it's easily one of the most impressive displays of visual technology we've seen yet from a next-generation game. Most impressive are the individual beads of water you can see drop and cascade along the scales of the two dragons doing battle in midflight. In fact, even Ken Kutaragi, president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment, was shocked to see this particular special effect. You can also pick out muscles, bone, and transparencies in the wings. Actually, the entirety of the dragon models looks spectacular, as it should seeing as how Phil Tippett, the man responsible for designing the dragon featured in the movie *Dragonheart*, lent his talents to *Lair*. The models he created for the game were scanned in, allowing the game's artists, sitting in the room pictured here, to add multiple layers of detailed textures to the dragons.

DODGED A BULLET

Factor 5's first game, *Denaris*, was such a rip-off of the original *R-Type* that the owner of the *R-Type* franchise, Activision, wanted to sue Factor 5's publisher, Rainbow Arts. But since Activision didn't have any teams that could do a decent port of the game for the Amiga, it asked Factor 5 to do the port in three months' time to avoid being sued.

influence for *Turrican* comes from *Super Mario Bros.*," Eggebrecht recalls. "In Germany, the Nintendo sold about 0.5 units [*laughs*], and I'm sure Nintendo wouldn't contest that because the [NES] simply wasn't aimed toward the German market. So, the concept behind *Turrican* was, why don't we take the jumping in *Super Mario Bros.*—which was so much fun—and merge it with an arcade game from Data East, along with *Contra* and *Metroid*?"

Turrican went on to be incredibly successful in Europe—so successful that Factor 5's publisher, Rainbow Arts, asked if the team could also do a version of the game for home consoles. "That was always our dream," says Eggebrecht. "That's when we started to get [international] recognition, and around that time Sega was one of the first companies to realize that the European market was huge, but Nintendo didn't wake up [to that fact] until later. So our publisher asked us to do a Genesis version and a Super Nintendo version of the game."

Instead of taking the easy route of just asking Sega and Nintendo for development kits of their respective systems, Factor 5 did what any other technologically savvy developer would've done—it just built its own. "It didn't exactly cross our minds to contact them," says Eggebrecht. "But we had a buddy in the German secret service and we basically told him [to] hack it, and we came up with our own development kits. We wrote all the tools, the compilers, and handlers."

It's that kind of motivation and effort to really get to know hardware that's been Factor 5's hallmark, but the company really wouldn't begin to hit its stride until its relationships with LucasArts and Nintendo were well established. While LucasArts and Factor 5 were growing their relationship, it became immediately clear that for it to grow any further, Factor 5 had to move to the United States. The problems with staying in Germany while developing a game such as *Rebel Assault* for the consoles were not only caused by the time difference between Germany and the California-based LucasArts, but also by the massive amount of data being used for the game—a full 650 megabytes to be exact, which may not seem like all that much these days, but it fills nearly an entire CD, and back then the Internet just wasn't fast enough to transfer files that big back then. FedEx bills started to pile up because it was the only practical method to send builds of the game back and forth. It got to be too much, so LucasArts told Factor 5 to pack up and move on out to sunny California to continue its work on the *Star Wars* franchise and build its reputation as a developer even more.

"WE BASICALLY TOLD HIM [TO] HACK IT, AND WE CAME UP WITH OUR OWN DEVELOPMENT KITS."

"LucasArts was nice enough to say, 'Why don't you transfer your whole company over [from Germany]?'" Eggebrecht recalls. "At the time, we only had 10 people—it's one thing to come over separately, and another to bring the entire company over." Fortunately, Factor 5 managed to get all of its equipment over in just two containers, but the days of less than 20 employees and very little equipment would soon be over.

TECHNOLOGY GOES A LONG WAY

The first *Rogue Squadron* demo, shown at E3 1998 for the Nintendo 64, didn't really have all that much to it. Essentially, all it showed was a movie of an AT-AT that really wasn't doing anything, yet it proved to be one of the most impressive demos that year. History would repeat itself for Factor 5 on the GameCube in 2000 at Nintendo's Spaceworld event.

THE STAR WARS YEARS

The idea for the first in a series of *Star Wars* games from Factor 5 didn't come from some sort of divine vision or anything glamorous like that. Rather, it was mostly based around the idea of a fractal landscape generator (essentially an easier method for generating landscapes), which is pretty much the reason you would expect from a technologically oriented team. "We did a lot of research into that," says Eggebrecht. "They said, 'OK, you want to work on *Star Wars*, but be careful with it,' and they knew we wanted to do a game based on all of the [trilogy's] greatest moments."

LucasArts' response to that second bit of information wasn't as positive. The publisher told Factor 5 that no one wanted to play a game based on all of the greatest moments in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, arguing that those movies were too old for anyone to really care about. "So we kept *Rogue Squadron* as close to the movies as we could," says Eggebrecht. "But we used our original story and had a lot of back and forth between here and LucasArts, so the game came together really in the last minute."

Still, it's worth pointing out that Factor 5 wasn't all about pushing the limits of the hardware it was working on. The first *Rogue Squadron* game also demonstrated the team's ability to address the inherent problem with flight simulators—namely, how inaccessible they can be. *Rogue Squadron*'s simplified controls and flexible camera system opened up 3D flight games to an even broader audience than Nintendo's own *Star Fox* games did, becoming not only a multimillion seller in the process, but one of the best-selling Nintendo 64 games of all time.

The sequel to *Rogue Squadron* would follow a similar path but on a different console. By the time the GameCube was announced, Factor 5 had solidified its ability to work with hardware more efficiently than most developers could. While still finishing the *Star Wars Episode I: Battle for Naboo* game for the Nintendo 64 and the PC, Factor 5 was already starting work on the sequel to *Rogue Squadron.* "We were dying to work on the [original trilogy] again," says Eggebrecht. "But work on [*Rogue Squadron II*] was totally clandestine. Nobody knew about it except for LucasArts President Simon Jeffries, and we got our demo together of the flyby [scene]."

THE FLYBY OF THE ASSAULT ON THE DEATH STAR LAUNCHED FACTOR 5 INTO THE SPOTLIGHT.

It's this flyby of the Rebel assault on the Death Star that launched Factor 5 into the spotlight. People were so completely shocked by the quality that they compared it to work done by Industrial Light & Magic for the Special Edition versions of the original *Star Wars* films. It was that good. "We did the same thing," says Eggebrecht, referencing a picture-by-picture comparison. Even the special-effects team working on the films was impressed. In fact, in the DVD version of the original trilogy, many assets from *Rogue Squadron II*, including the Yavin hangar and several of the ship models, were used in the menu screens.

CURIOUS GEORGE

When George Lucas saw clips of the trench run and other parts of *Rogue Squadron II*, he was particularly impressed with the lighting, something he felt had been preventing games from reaching a level of visual expression on par with movies.

DEFENDER
DONKEY KONG

WHEN SONY MET FACTOR 5

Eggebrecht and other members of Factor 5 have always kept in close contact with other members of the development community—despite what most people may think about developers hating each other's guts—and their relationship with Sony has been no different. "We're all at the same parties," Eggebrecht jokes. "After we did *Rebel Strike*, we started on games for next gen, and we really needed a break from *Star Wars* for a while. We certainly wanted to work on an original IP. Then we looked at the timeline, because if we wanted to reinvent everything we're doing here, we had to [work within] a certain time frame."

THE RISE OF LAIR

Making the jump from the GameCube to the PlayStation 3 is about as drastic as it gets. While the GameCube is a powerful machine in its own right (as shown by Factor 5's work on *Rogue Squadron II* and *Rogue Squadron III*), its power was tapped fairly early in the console's life cycle. The PlayStation 3 is a different beast in that it will take some time to first get to know the system and then to max out its power—a challenge perfectly suited for Factor 5. But the developer had some opportunities to prepare along the way. "We were using the Xbox for a while as a transition to the new consoles, because the Xbox had some features that the GameCube didn't have because of the Nvidia card," says Eggebrecht. "We knew what the next generation was going to be about, and as a member of the development community, we were expecting the worst, but the dream came true. [The capabilities are] exactly what we were prophesying."

From there, Factor 5 went back to what it has been about since the beginning. Instead of waiting, the team goes ahead and starts learning about new hardware on its own before it is even really revealed. This more than likely has come in handy during the development of Factor 5's PlayStation 3 launch game, *Lair*. But there's more to making a launch game than just being first. It's an opportunity to make a statement as a developer—a statement Factor 5 is more than prepared to make. "The gameplay has to be very intuitive and accessible. Yes, we have a certain emphasis on graphics, but graphics alone won't do it," says Eggebrecht. "Also, you have to find a balance between physics and gameplay, so you need to choose your battles wisely. That's the thing about launch titles—if you don't pick your battles right, [then you will encounter problems]."

Can Factor 5 upstage itself and bring a whole new level of visual quality to consoles? The answer is simple. The shift from the hard lines and metallic surfaces of *Star Wars* to the organic look and feel of the dragons from the *Lair* demo presents the team with all-new opportunities to reveal levels of detail that were previously unattainable on consoles. "It comes down to subject matter. There's a reason why [*Lair*] is what is," Eggebrecht adds. "That's where the jump in graphics is going to happen."

> "WORKING ON AN ORIGINAL IP IS SO MUCH MORE EXCITING. BUT IT WAS TOUGH FINDING A PUBLISHER."

Ultimately, the decision to become a PS3 developer boiled down to finding the best fit. "It came down to talking to Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft, but Sony just [made the most convincing argument]," Eggebrecht says. "I'd love in the future to work on another *Star Wars* title, [but] working on an original IP is so much more exciting. It was tough finding a publisher, but Sony was totally cool about it."

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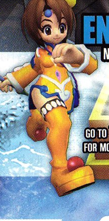

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Mild Language
Suggestive Themes

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ZOE FLOWER

ACTIVE IMAGINATION

ZOE FLOWER is a columnist and self-professed blog addict. She hangs out at 1UP.com when she is not skulking around shopping malls with her video camera in the hopes of creating a festive podcast of "When Christmas Shoppers Attack."

Oh, Christmas holidays! The lights, the trees, and the shopping for videogames that companies have flooded into the market in the hopes of selling them to crazed consumers who will buy anything! It was this time of year that I was yet again quarantined in U.S. Customs with some of my favorite camouflage-clad friends, who were trying to deal with the glut of travelers visiting family (and malls). With camo being one of my favorite new fashion trends, I didn't feel quite so intimidated in front of Agent Vasquez as he interrogated me about my plans to visit New York City on the eve of a certain new console launch. And so, we got to chatting.

> "HOW CAN SOMEONE GRASP THE CONCEPT OF THE ART AND CREATIVITY THE INDUSTRY OFFERS?"

Now, Agent Vasquez is a busy man. He "chats" with hundreds of people a day who have strange professions or perhaps dodgy-looking passport photos (I have both!). When my mouth uttered the word "videogames," it was as if a giant red siren went off in the airport and Agent Vasquez was ready for battle. "You kids these days!" he said (I didn't bother correcting him as to my '70s-era birth date). "You don't want toys anymore. You just want these videogames, and there's no more imagination! I have parents coming through here all day, and their kids just want their Nintendo everything." He did not find it funny when I suggested that perhaps PlayStation was a more interesting pursuit.

Of course, Vasquez had a gun, so I wasn't going to express my passionate belief that videogames may well be one of the last bastions of pure imaginative expression. I just clamped my hand over my mouth and nodded sympathetically like a teenager taking sage advice. But on the plane, I couldn't settle down. Vasquez's opinion infuriated me. I am so tired of the constant demonizing, finger-pointing, and Hot Coffee ridiculousness that this industry endures. Why can't people see things the way I do? It was a few days later, while seeing shoppers pull each other's hair out for the last Xbox 360 on the shelf (not unlike some sort of zombiefest out of *Resident Evil 4*), that I realized Agent Vasquez only reacts to what he sees. How can someone grasp the concept of the art and creativity the industry offers when all he sees is the latest machine caught up in a mass consumer frenzy that most resembles the actions of a religious cult of brainwashed fanatics?

As I look over a list on my coffee table of beautifully artistic games—*Prince of Persia, Peter Jackson's King Kong, Shadow of the Colossus*—I realize Agent Vasquez doesn't have a clue as to the creativity and imagination these games inspire. And now it seems that the more mainstream a console becomes, the less likely he ever will. So as the PS3 begins its release to much fanfare this spring, I will be thinking harder about why I want it in the first place and just what it is that inspires me to purchase one. If you haven't figured it out yet for yourself, then remember to use your imagination.

THE EVIL IN QUESTION

SIMULTANEOUS ZOMBIE ACTION

Capcom announced that it would like to simultaneously release *Resident Evil 5* for both the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. After all, the video for the game, featuring a character who appears to be Chris Redfield, was shown at both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 conferences held in Japan a few months ago. When pressed further on the issue, Capcom developer Keiji Inafune, head of Capcom R&D and father of the *Mega Man* series, said that Capcom would like to turn *Resident Evil* into a multiplatform franchise but that it depends on Sony's time frame for the PlayStation 3 launch. Not much is known about *Resident Evil 5* aside from the fact that the location—seemingly with a desert climate—will bring new gameplay ideas to the series and play off the concept of utilizing light and darkness.

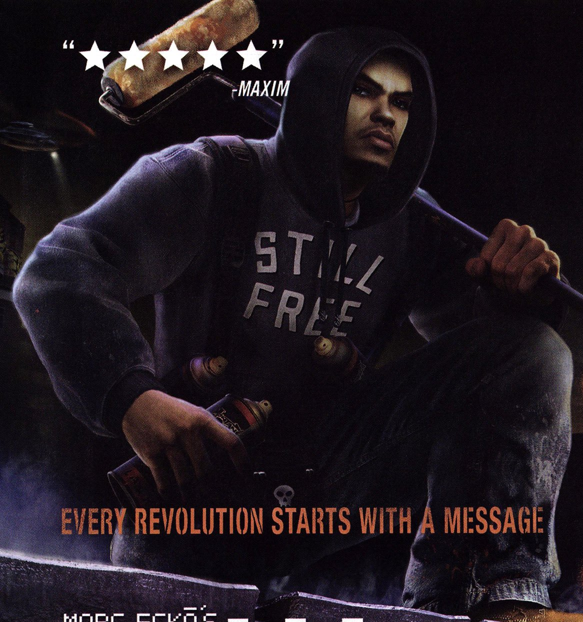
FAILING GRADE

ESRB COMES UNDER FIRE

As if the Hot Coffee debacle wasn't enough to hurt the Entertainment Software Rating Board's integrity, the National Institute on Media and the Family issued an overall D+ grade to the organization responsible for placing ratings and ratings information on games. Other grades were given for individual categories, including ratings accuracy, which received an F. Ratings education received a C+, while ratings enforcement received a D-. The Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association issued a statement in response to the NIMF's evaluation of the ESRB. "We were disappointed to learn that the NIMF continues to unevenly weight the results of their sting operations (judging the effectiveness of retailer enforcement stemming the sale of Mature-rated games to minors)," said IEMA president Hal Halpin. "The fact that they weight their conclusions by [the results coming from] individual stores rather than by actual real-world market value is significant, both to the statistics as well as to the practical realities of sales. Not weighting the data evenly by market share may well account for the NIMF sting results quite literally swinging wildly back and forth over the past five years."

> "...MERCHANTS WHO WOULD PEDDLE PORNOGRAPHIC GARBAGE TO KIDS."

In related news, Illinois will have to look for an alternative method for blocking the sale of violent videogames to minors. A court ruling stated that a law against the sale of violent games to the younger set was unconstitutional and that purchase decisions should rest in the hands of parents, not the government. Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich said that he plans to appeal the court's decision: "Parents should be able to expect that their kids will not have access to excessively violent and sexually explicit videogames without their permission. This crusade against violent videogames is something a lot of parents are going to want to participate in and express their views on the appropriateness of merchants who would peddle pornographic and violent garbage to their kids."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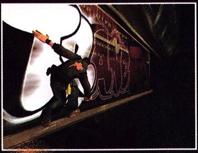
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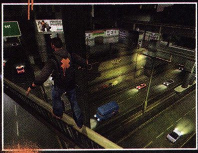
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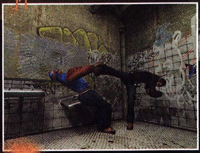
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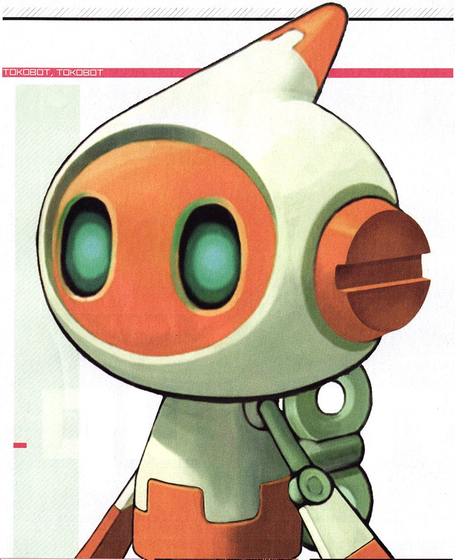
TRENDSPOTTER

YO, ROBOT

Oh sure, robots may seem cool now. They can fetch our drinks, repair vehicles, absorb the powers of other robots, blow things up, form a robotic ladder, or expound upon the consequences of smoking. But these little suckers are waiting for the perfect opportunity to spring a trap…a robotrap if you will. One day your own personal robot is going to invite you into the kitchen for some delicious cookies, and when you take your first bite into that chewy chocolate chip cookie, that robot is going to whack you over the head with some salmon from your freezer and then use your head as a candy jar! Robots are everywhere.

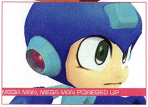


TOKOBOT, TOKOBOT

OTACON, METAL GEAR SOLID 4

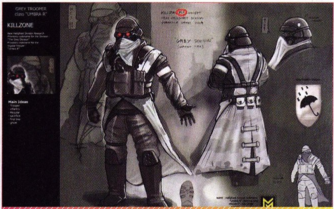
RANDOM MECH, ARMORED CORE 4

CLANK, R&C: UP YOUR ARSENAL



MEGA MAN, MEGA MAN POWERED UP

MEGA MAN X, MEGA MAN X COLLECTION

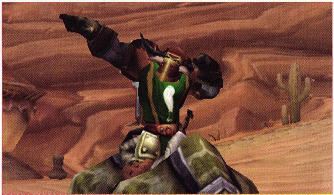


IN THE 'ZONE

SONY SWALLOWS GUERRILLA GAMES

Though ***Killzone*** didn't exactly light up sales charts, Sony still sees the game as being a major property for the PlayStation brand—so much so, in fact, that it has bought the game's developer, Guerrilla Games, from its parent company, Media Republic. "Guerrilla have a great combination of creative, technical, and production talent in their team, and we have enjoyed a close working relationship with their management and staff for a number of years," says Phil Harrison, president of Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios. "I am delighted that they will now become a member of the SCE Worldwide Studios network of developers as we prepare for the launch of PlayStation 3 next year."

Media Republic also issued a statement essentially saying that game development is a "specialized business" and that Guerrilla deserves to be in Sony's hands. Both a PS3 and a PSP version of *Killzone* are currently in the works.

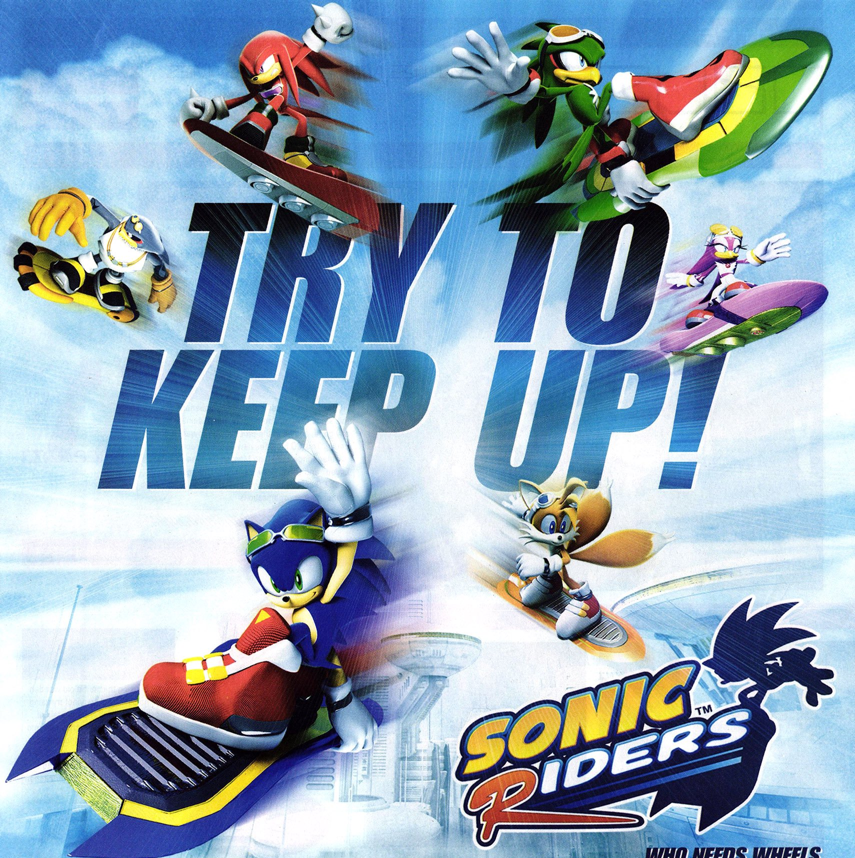


GAME ENVY

WHAT WE WANT ON THE PLAYSTATION: WORLD OF WARCRAFT (PC)

The PlayStation world is sorely lacking in massively multiplayer online gameplay (*EverQuest Online Adventures* didn't draw in enough users, and *Final Fantasy XI* is only played by Japanese kids and Ryan Vulk), and if Sony is serious about having a powerful online presence for PS3, the company needs something like *World of WarCraft*. Blizzard has refined the core gameplay of its online RPG to a near-perfect state, and as a result, *WOW* is the MMORPG that is easy for total newbies to play, yet has enough complexity, strategy, and yes, phat loot for RPG veterans to bite into. Whether you're level 5 or 55, you'll always find monsters to kill, quests to complete, and massive dungeons to raid in order to get awesome items. *WOW* recently celebrated its first anniversary, much to the chagrin of various spouses who've lost their loved ones to the allure of things like "level 40 mount" or "epic weapon" or "SM run."

Our free advice to Sony: Find a way to get *WOW* on the PS3.



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Shred the Wake!

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pause

WHEN YOU'RE NOT PLAYING GAMES

LISTEN

CRIPPLE CROW

Devendra Banhart

OK, so imagine a bunch of hippies sitting around in a circle singing about white monkeys and yellow spiders, or picture Woody Guthrie on speed, and you pretty much have a good idea of what Devendra Banhart is all about. Actually, you won't really understand until you check out the website (www.cripplecrow.com) and view one of the bizarre music videos. They should put some kind of warning on this stuff.

THIS IS ALICE MUSIC 9

Various Artists

THIS IS ALICE MUSIC 9
Alice @ 97.3

Normally, we wouldn't promote compilations like this since they tend to be crap, but this one is actually good, and all of the proceeds go toward a good cause. This CD includes new acoustic recordings of popular songs, including Maroon 5's "She Will Be Loved" and Lenny Kravitz's "Lady." The money from each CD sold will be given to San Francisco Bay Area breast cancer organizations.

SEE

QUALITY OF LIFE

Relentless Company

Want to get a primer of what tagging is all about before *Marc Ecko's Getting Up* hits store shelves? Look no further than *Quality of Life*, a film shot in various locations around San Francisco that chronicles the exploits of graffiti artists struggling to practice their art, have lives, and avoid getting taken down by the man. Check out the trailer at www.qualityoflife-themovie.com.

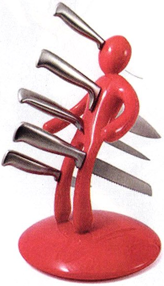
THE ROUGH GUIDE TO
sci-fi movies
JOHN SCALZI

THE ROUGH GUIDE TO SCI-FI MOVIES

John Scalzi

Covering 103 years of science-fiction films, this new book from *OPM* contributor John Scalzi has been on the radar of geeks everywhere—most notably for "The Canon," a list of 50 essential films that's perfectly ripe for message board debate. Also included are sci-fi films from around the world and profiles of the most influential people in the genre. A great way to up your nerd IQ.

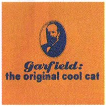
FEEL



VOODOO KNIFE DISPLAY

Raffaele Iannello

Tired of using that same old wooden knife holder? Well, why not try using one that will not only be the talk of the town, but will also strike fear into your enemies? The Voodoo Knife Display has slots for several knives and pretty much looks like something a ninja would have in his or her kitchen if ninjas had kitchens.



SHARP AS TOAST T-SHIRTS

Mr. Toast

"Chester A. Arthur Is Totally A. Awesome" says one of the many humorous, politically themed shirts from Sharp as Toast (www.sharpastoast.com). Other favorites include "Keep It Coolidge" and "Nix-On, Nix-Off," as well as a Propaganda Panda T-shirt. Sure, 90 percent of the population will have no idea what these shirts are referring to, but that's the beauty of these things, now isn't it?

ONE WANTS TO FREE HIS PEOPLE...

I RETURNED HOME EXPECTING PEACE. INSTEAD I FOUND MY KINGDOM RAVAGED BY WAR AND MY PEOPLE ENSLAVED. NOW I AM A FUGITIVE, HUNTED BY HOSTILE ARMIES AND PLAGUED BY A CURSE THAT IS GRADUALLY POSSESSING MY SOUL. A DARKER PRINCE RESIDES IN ME NOW. AND I MUST EMBRACE HIS POWERS AND SKILL IF I WANT TO RESTORE PEACE TO MY LAND, MY PEOPLE, AND MY SOUL.

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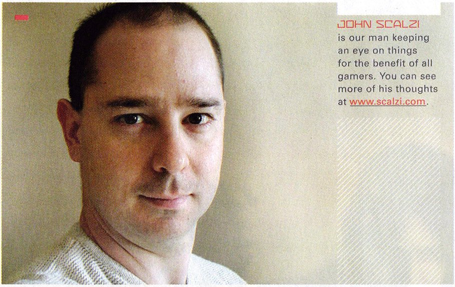

JOHN SCALZI is our man keeping an eye on things for the benefit of all gamers. You can see more of his thoughts at www.scalzi.com.

THE WATCHDOG

NOW KID FRIENDLY

Sony recently announced that in addition to all the other creamy feature goodness that PlayStation fans are expecting out of the PS3, the company is adding another—parental controls, which allow individuals to set the PS3 to not play games above a certain ESRB level. Don't want Junior playing whatever iteration of *Grand Theft Auto* will come out for the PS3? Block M-rated games. Sony's announcement makes the next-gen consoles three for three in the parental control department, as the Xbox 360 ships with such controls and Nintendo has announced a similar feature for its upcoming Revolution rig.

> IT SUCKS TO BE 12, FOR MANY REASONS, AND THIS WILL JUST BE ANOTHER ONE.

How do I feel about this? If the game industry wants to promote the idea that parents should be in charge of their kids' gaming, then it helps to give parents the tools to help them do that job. I can't imagine that the parental controls will be deeply popular to the 12-year-old who wants to play a massively violent FPS, but—hate to say it—so what? It sucks to be 12, for many reasons, and this will just be another one. From the industry's point of view, this is a proactive and simple fix, the sort of thing it can point to in government testimony and say, "See? We're doing our part." It also leaves the adult-gamer market unmolested, which is critical when the average gamer age is inching toward 30.

But as a practical matter, will these parental controls mean anything? A number of years ago people were getting vaporous about sex and violence on TV; therefore, since 2000, all new TVs with screens larger than 13 inches have been equipped with a V-Chip: a programmable feature that lets parents block TV programs above a certain rating level. In September 2004, the Kaiser Family Foundation polled parents to see how many of them actually used the V-Chip at home. The answer: 15 percent. Parents have had the ability for six entire years to control through technology what their kids see on TV—they just don't, more often than not. But parents are still worried about what their kids see on TV.

So here's the question: Right out of the box, parents will be able to control what their kids play on the next generation of consoles. My personal feeling is that the majority won't, no matter how easy Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo make it for them to do so. And that's a real shame, since parents won't stop worrying about the games their kids play. Parental controls are the right move, but they won't stop the debate about videogame sex and violence.

Of course, you can do your part: Any time you hear someone complain about violent games, remind them of the parental controls available to them. If they complain that these things are complicated to use, you might ask them who they trust to make decisions for their kids: themselves or the government? And then watch them squirm.

PLAYSTATION BITS

Didn't get enough cowboy-vampire action? Then you'll be happy to know that ***Darkwatch 2*** is apparently being pitched internally at High Moon Studios. As one of Dracula's victims might say, "Please don't suck."... If you really can't wait for the PlayStation 3 to arrive to get another dose of hot Dante action, keep an eye out for ***Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble***, a *VJ* fighting game that lets you play as Dante. Of course, there's also the special edition of ***Devil May Cry 3*** coming to PS2 in January. It includes, among other things, a harder difficulty setting and a mode that lets you play as Dante's devil brother, Virgil.... Elsewhere, Electronic Arts is being sued by someone who claims that the company ripped off his idea for its Superstar mode in ***Madden NFL 2006***. Get in line, buddy. Get in line.... Also, the tagging game ***Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*** will be getting up into movie theaters thanks to MTV Films—or maybe no thanks.

WHAT'S IN YOUR PSP?

ALEX WARD

Creative director at Criterion, currently working on *Black*

GAMES: The game I am playing at the moment is Sony's excellent *Pursuit Force*. I'm a big fan of old arcade racers, and this is a great homage to a lot of my favorites. If you're old enough to remember Taito's *Chase HQ*, then this is the PSP game for you.

MOVIES: I've just received *The Island* on DVD, so I'll be ripping that to my memory stick later today. It may have bombed at the box office, but I absolutely loved it—check out the *Burnout*-esque car chase in there! If it's UMDs you're interested in, then I've just been given a copy of *Ong-bak*—apparently all the stunts are REAL.

MUSIC: Madonna's *Confessions on a Dance Floor*—anything that samples ABBA is great in my book.

WEB: I regularly point my browser to the Usenet discussion group rec.games.pinball—I'm a huge pinball fan, and this is a great place to go for all sorts of pinball info. I just bought my latest table three days ago, and I am excited to finally own Williams' amazing *Medieval Madness*.

...THE OTHER TO DOMINATE THEM

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"9.25 OUT OF 10"
- GAME INFORMER

PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE TWO THRONES™

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"9 OUT OF 10"
- PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Nudity

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

XBOX

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

PlayStation 2

UBISOFT

THE OPM INTERVIEW: HIDEO KOJIMA

BY JAMES MIELKE

IN A LONELY PLACE

INSIDE THE MIND OF THE MAN BEHIND METAL GEAR

Hideo Kojima, considered by many to be the preeminent videogame auteur, was photographed at the Bijutsu Club in Tokyo on December 6, 2005.

The date: December 1, 2005; the place: the Roppongi district of Tokyo, where foreigners mingle with the natives shuttling to and fro amidst the tumult and chaos of restaurants, bars, electronics shops, hostess clubs, and upscale boutiques that define the area. The setting on this brisk and sunny day was Hideo Kojima's residence in the Mori Building, ensconced within the greater Roppongi Hills complex, which houses—among other things—Konami's worldwide headquarters. The reason for our meeting: to learn more about the man who made *Metal Gear* solid (his reference to bringing the series into 3D), to find out what makes him tick, where he got his eye for detail, and what inspires him get out of bed every morning to make videogames.

Hideo Kojima has been at the forefront of modern videogame design for nearly 20 years now, from the ripe old days of the MSX system to his recent eye-popping *Metal Gear Solid 4* demonstration for the PlayStation 3. He's continually pushed the boundaries of Japanese game design further than any other developer, save for perhaps Shigeru Miyamoto, and he is without equal in his cinematic approach. He has influenced legions of would-be stealth-survivors, from *Tenchu* to *Rogue Ops* to *Splinter Cell*, and has nurtured a small handful of potential successors to the *Metal Gear* throne in Shinta Nojiri (*Metal Gear Acid*) and Shuyo Murata (*Zone of the Enders*). Kojima is, without question, one of the most important figures in the videogame industry, bringing in heavy hitters like Harry Gregson-Williams to score the soundtracks to his games and cinematic title wizards like Kyle Cooper to set the tone.

While the gritty nature of most of his games suggests a no-nonsense director at the helm, a sharper eye will spot the sly sense of humor continually at work underneath the surface. So in order to discern how games like *MGS3: Subsistence* happen into existence, we arranged a meeting with Konami's visionary, kicked traditional game-related questions to the curb, and had ourselves a real conversation with him to find out what makes Hideo Kojima Hideo Kojima.

I OPM You've been making some of the most groundbreaking videogames for nearly 20 years now. What makes you want to get up and keep making games every day?
I HIDEO KOJIMA [*Sipping his coffee*] You know, videogames being interactive, it's a kind of service industry. The key to being a videogame creator is to provide different kinds of service. And in order to provide all kinds of service, you have to know people, and in doing so, I obviously have my own personality, and then I have my friends, family, relatives, and all of that. And then I assume virtual personalities through what I've seen in the past, and then using all these different personalities, real and virtual, I try out my own game in order to adjust it for all those people out there who would be playing my game.

The thing is, yes, I do have these different personalities, but there are millions of people out there, so what I have, all these personalities within myself, are not enough for me to tweak the game and create games. So I have focus groups and gather people and see how they play the game. Since it's a service industry, there's really no end. I can keep on offering things, and as I grow older, I can even provide a better service through what I've learned and experienced in the years of my life. The thing is, there really is no end, and that's what makes me go on. It's like a restaurant in the food industry, where you can provide a service to people. With films and games, it's fun to write the script and the story and then also do the directing, but with videogames, because it's interactive, there's this element of providing service, and in doing so, I basically have to know more about humans, about people, and it's this process of learning about people, knowing more about people, that makes me a bigger person, a broader person. And that's why it's something I can't really stop doing. It's something I enjoy doing.

I OPM Where do you get most of your stimuli from? Do you get it from music, from movies, from books you read?
I HK If you check out my blog, you'll probably know what stimulates me, but the thing is, I'm working all day long. It's not like I can go on around-the-world travel; it's not like I go on risky, dangerous adventures or anything. I basically go to work like anyone else to get paid. Even while I spend most of my time in the office working, I get to meet different people, I get to listen to different music, I get to see different movies. Basically, it's doing my thing every day, living and going into the office. If I have my sensors on, I just run into things and absorb what I run into. It's not like I have to do anything special to get stimulated.

It might be a little hard to understand, but when I walk down the street, if I see a stone in the middle of the street, that's a stimulus. People probably walk by, but I'll say, "Why is this thing sitting in the middle of the road?" Or even like your slipper. [*Motions to the interviewer*] "Why is this guy wearing one slipper and not the other?" These things might not be stimuli to other people, but these things to me are seeds of stimuli.

I OPM In your blog it's easy to tell that you're very observant of the little details. So I can see why you'd notice that I'm only wearing one slipper. In the past you've mentioned how your parents moved when you were a child, causing you to lose all of your friends, and that this made you somewhat introverted. Did this lead you to focus on details more?
I HK It's just my personality, I think. My wife says she doesn't like people with my personality. [*Laughs*] It's very exhausting, because when we go out to dinner together, for a meal, I always complain about the food, and she doesn't enjoy that. I really don't know why these things stimulate me. I catch these things; things concern me. Maybe in that sense I'm still a child that hasn't grown up but has aged—I'm like a big child. It's not like I really question everything. It's not like, "Why is this like that?" It's not a bunch of whys. More like every time I run into something I start thinking about it, thinking about the background story that sits behind that thing or person or whatever. And when I meet someone, I start thinking about what kind of family he or she has, or what kind of life he has been living so far, and it's these things that I start thinking about.

I OPM What would you say have been the most influential things in your life? I know you like Joy Division, so maybe it was their album *Closer* that moved you. Or maybe it was having a child of your own.
I HK You know, people ask me that, like what was the first movie that impacted you the most, and I really can't answer that because I've been impacted every day by a lot of things. So it's just a lot of things that have influenced me big time, but you mentioned my child. That obviously was a big influence in my life. That really divides the B.C. and A.D. within my life. That was a big impact.

The thing is, when I was a child myself I was one of these—first of all I'm going to give you the Japanese term *kagi-ko*, which literally means "key child"—what it is means is both of your parents are working, so the kid basically has the key to the house. And after school you go home and your parents aren't there, so you open the door with the key yourself and go in there and no one's in the house. Kagi-ko isn't even really used anymore in Japan; it's a very old sort of idea.

Kids basically have the keys hanging on straps; moms give them the key, but the straps end up being too long, so when they go up on the horizontal bar, they end up wrapping around. [*Laughs*] But as a kagi-ko, no one's there, so I'd go home and watch TV and I felt very lonely. Sometimes I'd look at my mom's big mirror and would start crying. That probably has a big impact on me right now. I'm still a lonely guy; I feel solitude all the time, even when I'm with people. While I do feel lonely, I do sort of enjoy solitude as well. I like to hang out with people, but when I hang out with people, I end up noticing that people are different from me, and I feel more solitude. But then when my son was born, I guess that really changed things. I don't feel that absolute solitude any more.

For example, you mentioned Joy Division; they have a song called "Isolation." Like punk music, in that kind of music, while they feel frustrated, they direct their frustration outside. In their songs they basically want to destroy society and rules; it's like an exploding force. But then came alternative rock, alternative music, where the energy sort of implodes. Everything goes internally. When I bumped into that kind of music, I really felt happy in the sense that "Oh, there are people like me in England as well."

Like Tears for Fears: The guys were going to shrinks, and the shrinks said, "Why don't you make music?" and that's how they sort of came about. So people like them. Their music has had a big impact on me.

> "I'M STILL A LONELY GUY; I FEEL SOLITUDE ALL THE TIME, EVEN WHEN I'M WITH PEOPLE."

I OPM It's interesting you mention that. Tears for Fears' first couple albums, *The Hurting* and *Songs From the Big Chair*, were exercises originating from their Janovian primal-scream therapy sessions. The song "Shout" specifically was the purest example of that.
I HK OK, we should go to karaoke next time. We'll sing the song. I haven't been singing lately. [*Laughs*]

I OPM If you had to pick a song to sing right now, what would it be?
I HK The first song would be "Don't Cry" by Asia. The problem is, even when I sing the song, the people who go with me aren't familiar with it, so it's pretty sad. There's a lot of stimuli out there, though. Putting music aside—movies and books, I love all kinds of books and movies. I have diverse tastes.

I OPM What would we see on your DVD shelf and bookshelf right now?
I HK That's a tough question. That choice I'd be making would change every day.

I OPM What would you be in the mood for right now?
I HK Today is not necessarily the best answer, but I just bought the DVD of *The Butterfly Effect*, and I haven't watched it yet, so I'll probably go watch it.

I OPM And a book?
I HK There's this Japanese writer called Masaki Yamada, and his latest book, called *Mystery Opera*, is a book I'm reading. And I've bought the latest book by Paul Wilson, but I haven't read it yet. I go to the bookstore and CD store every day. I commute using the train, and there's a

HIDEO KOJIMA LIKES...

BLOGGING

You can check out Kojima's translated blog here: www.blog.konami.jp/gs/hideoblog_e/ if you want to see what he's up to on a semiregular basis. You know. If you're into that sort of thing.

JOY DIVISION

The proto alt-rock, gloomy British band, which eventually gave way to New Order following lead singer Ian Curtis's suicide in 1981, provided the soundtrack to Kojima's isolated youth. Not coincidentally, both Joy Division and New Order have greatest-hits albums titled *Substance*.

big bookstore on the way where I change trains. It's what I enjoy doing every day. I'm not of the generation where people surf the Net to see what's coming out soon. I just go to the store. I have these feelings; I sort of know that something's coming out, so I go to the store.

It's like meeting people when I go into a bookstore. There are like 10,000 books there, and I end up picking one; the chances are miraculous. Even when buying music, this is something I do: It's called "jacket buying" or "cover buying." I basically have no idea what the music is, but I just like the cover of the record, and I buy it. Most of the time, or more than half the time, the music ends up being bad. But I just cherish this actual physical meeting of people and products.

I OPM Would you lament the day software publishers dispense with packaging and design altogether, as companies like Valve move toward a download-only generation? Obviously, the tons of special editions and limited packaging you release for your games (at least in Japan) reveals how much you appreciate good design.
I HK You know, downloading stuff is like meeting the internal organs of a person. That's not what I want. You sort of want to wonder what this person is about, what kind of person he or she is. Same with books: You pick it up and try to figure out what it's about; maybe you're eager to read it. Or even if it's music and you have no idea what it's going to sound like, but you pick it up and imagine and expect things. And I think that's what adds to the whole experience, instead of just getting the internal organs like you see in these pictures [*points to framed pictures of X-rays of skulls hanging on his wall*], the inside.

The packaging is part of the product as well, and the service. Another thing I don't like about things with the Internet in addition to downloading is, there are people out there who read people's reviews before going to a movie. You read someone's review and say, "Hey it sounds good; I'm going to go and see the movie." That I don't like. I'd rather see the movie myself first and then try to see what people thought about it. I think that if this kind of culture prevails, people will end up not making their own decisions, or people will basically depend on [other] people's tastes. By doing that you won't be able to brush up or improve your own senses and tastes. It is a dangerous trend where people will not go out for themselves or feel or decide instinctively what is good or bad if they depend on other people's tastes.

> "DOWNLOADING STUFF IS LIKE MEETING THE INTERNAL ORGANS OF A PERSON."

I OPM Do you think people would be doing themselves a disservice if they read my review of *MGS4* before going to buy the game?
I HK Well, if more people are going to buy the game after reading your review, please. [*Laughs*] I know I'm contradicting myself. The thing is, on the Internet, there's so much data, like rankings. For example, you see the top-10 box-office movies or top-10 best-selling CDs. It's just information like numbers and data, and people say, "Oh, this is popular; I'm going to go buy it." It definitely is a way to choose things, you know, seeing the best-selling CDs and saying, "I'm going to buy this because it's selling well." That definitely is a way. People really should depend on their own senses, on their own abilities, to try to sense what's good and bad.

I OPM Since you obviously do a lot of interviews, what is the most annoying interview question that keeps coming up?
I HK OK, this is like a Japan-only question, but I'm called Kojima-kantoku. *Kantoku* means "director," but director in Japan usually means a movie director. The title comes after the name, like Kurosawa-kantoku or Kojima-kantoku. "Why do people call you Kojima-kantoku?" That question I hate.

I OPM Do they ask that a lot?
I HK I was asked that yesterday. The Japanese media, that's like the first question they ask me.

I OPM Is that supposed to be a sign of respect? Maybe they're trying to brown-nose you before the interview?
I HK I think it's the opposite. The thing is, the word kantoku is usually associated with film directors, and in Japan I think people view film directors as superior to videogame directors. The word in English is the same, a film director or videogame director. I guess in Japan, videogame directors are not referred to as kantoku, so I guess they think, "The film directors are way up there; why are you called kantoku along with them?" It's a way of disrespect, sort of.

I OPM It's funny you should say that. With the exception of some highly respected film directors, like Kurosawa, among others, the Japanese film industry isn't generally considered top tier, usually because of films' miniscule budgets compared to what Hollywood can produce. The Japanese videogame industry, on the other hand, is generally considered top-notch, with high-quality CG, game graphics, innovation, etc., and with most of the big franchises coming out of Japan. The Japanese film industry doesn't usually grab too much attention outside of Japan, while the Japanese game industry most certainly does.
I HK Please write that! Keep writing about that to change things. Don't use me on the cover; put that on the cover! That message there.

I OPM Have you heard of [film critic] Roger Ebert's assessment that videogames can never be viewed as art? How do you feel about that?
I HK I don't think they're art either, videogames. The thing is, art is something that radiates the artist, the person who creates that piece of art. If 100 people walk by and a single person is captivated by whatever that piece radiates, then it's art. But videogames aren't trying to capture one person. A videogame should make sure that all 100 people that play that game should enjoy the service provided by that videogame. It's something of service. It's not art. But I guess the way of providing service with that videogame is an artistic style, a form of art.

For example, look at a concept car. You don't have to be able to drive a car, but if it's called a car and it has artistic elements in the visuals, then it's art. But an actual car, like a videogame, is interactive, so it's something used by people, so it's like a car where you have to drive it. There are 100 people driving a car; they have 100 ways of driving it and using it. It could be families driving the car. It could be a couple driving a car. The owner of the car could be driving along the coastline, or they could go up into the mountains, so this car has to be able to be driven by all 100 of these people, so in that sense it's totally not art.

I OPM By that same token, if you had a Picasso on the wall, you may totally enjoy his work. I imagine you would if you had one hanging up. But I may hate Picasso; I may prefer the Bauhaus movement. So if we have different opinions, maybe we're not physically "using" it for anything specific; we're still using our minds to evaluate it, just like the performance of a car or a videogame. That's not going to stop art from being art, but videogames can still be artistic.
I HK Let me say this in a different way, so I can better explain the nuance in what I'm trying to say. That building there [*points to one of the adjacent Roppongi Hills towers*] has an art museum called Mori Museum, but any museum will do. Art is the stuff you find in the museum, whether it be a painting or statue. What I'm doing, what videogame creators are doing, is running the museum—how do we light up things, where do we place things, how do we sell tickets? It's basically running the museum for those who come to the museum to look at the art. For better or worse, what I do, Hideo Kojima, myself, is run the museum and also create the art that's displayed in the museum.

I OPM So do you think the user's involvement in affecting the outcome of a game affects a game's artistic credibility, because it's left to the user to "finish" the painting?
I HK Not necessarily. Online games maybe, because what you're doing is basically providing them the arena, the play tools, and leaving everything up to the player, so for online games, maybe yes. What I do with my videogames, and specifically *Metal Gear Solid*, is provide a canvas and paint and the paintbrushes to everyone who buys the game. Obviously, some people can draw well or paint well while some people cannot. I basically provide them with the tools and make sure these people are satisfied with their painting. They're like, "Man, I'm a marvelous artist. I can paint! I can draw!" I make sure they get the satisfaction when they play my games, that they're able to draw something that they're very satisfied with at the end.

TEARS FOR FEARS

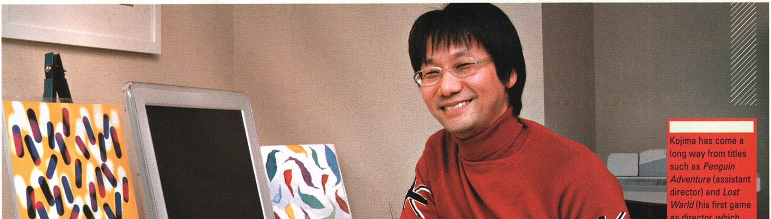
Like Joy Division but far poppier, Tears for Fears—devotees of Dr. Arthur Janov's primal scream therapy—channeled a similar angst throughout the early '80s with evocative, synth-driven albums, namely 1983's *The Hurting* and 1985's world-dominating *Songs From the Big Chair*.

ASIA

If Kojima could go to karaoke right now, he'd cause a revolution by rushing headlong into his usually tasteful music selection by slapping on "Don't Cry" by '80s supergroup Asia, which comprised various members from prog-rock outfits King Crimson; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Yes; and the Buggles.

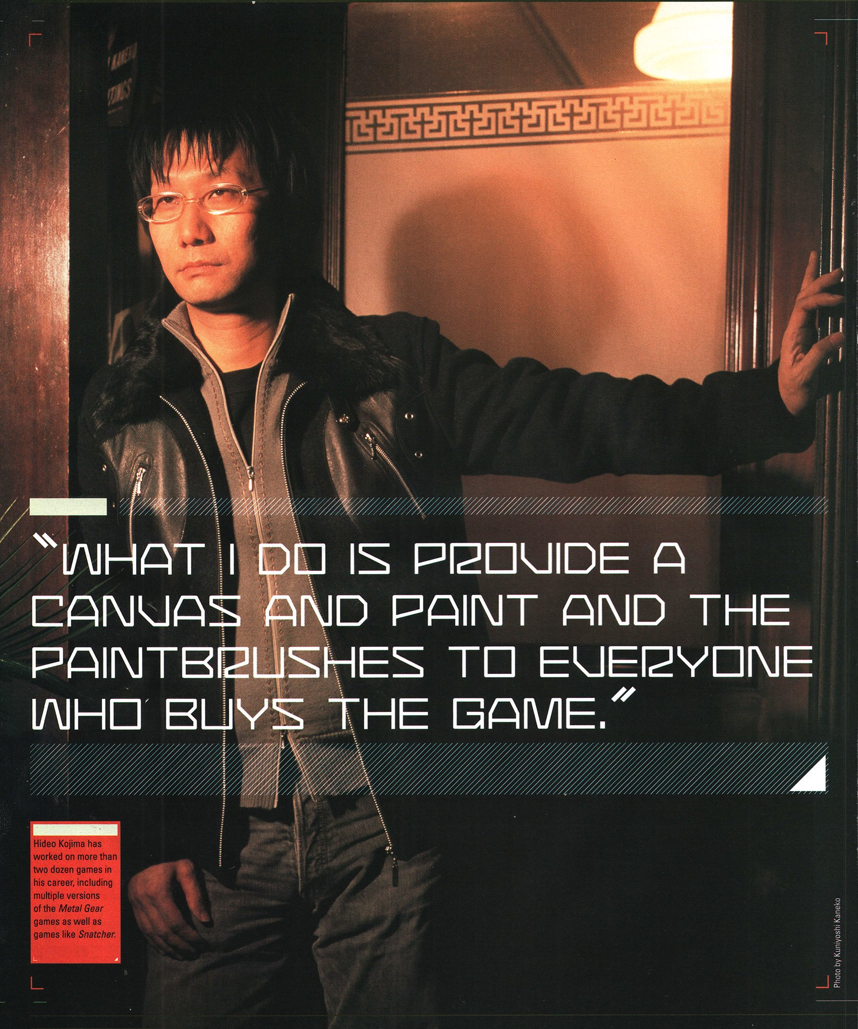
Kojima, shown here in his apartment on December 1, 2005, has on display a variety of memorabilia from projects he has worked on.

“PEOPLE SHOULD DEPEND ON THEIR OWN ABILITIES TO SENSE WHAT’S GOOD AND BAD.”



Kojima has come a long way from titles such as *Penguin Adventure* (assistant director) and *Lost Warld* (his first game as director, which was canceled due to his newbie status).

Photos by Yasu Nakaoka



“WHAT I DO IS PROVIDE A CANVAS AND PAINT AND THE PAINTBRUSHES TO EVERYONE WHO BUYS THE GAME.”

Hideo Kojima has worked on more than two dozen games in his career, including multiple versions of the *Metal Gear* games as well as games like *Snatcher.*

Photo by Kuniyoshi Kaneko

I OPM Games like *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Ico* are the games most often referred to as art in videogame form, due to their distinct visual quality. Many people point to those games as art. Do you think there are exceptions, such as these games, where you could look at them and say, "OK, those are art"? Or do you think all games fall under a blanket assessment?
I HK I think they're good games, but I think they're just another game. In [*Shadow of the Colossus*], you ride a horse. It's a horse; it looks like a horse. But in art, I can paint this cup [*lifts up his coffee cup*] and call the painting *Horse*. That's art. The music and the graphics used in a game—they have artistic elements, I agree. But everything else is very intuitive. It's easy to play in the sense that the horse looks like a horse and you obviously know that you have to ride the horse, so what I think it does is provide a service.

Maybe let's say there's a game out there where there's a boss that you cannot defeat. It's made that way. Normally, when you beat the boss in a game, there's a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, but if you can't beat the boss at all, if what you're left with is a sense of loss, then maybe that could be defined as art. You know Taro Okamoto—he's dead but a very famous Japanese artist. I don't know the official English translation of it, but one of his pieces is called *The Refusing Chair*. It's something that sort of looks like a chair, but it's got bumps on it, so you can't sit on it, but if you do, it's going to hurt your butt. With videogames you have to make sure you can sit on the chair. That's why you want to think about art and videogames. I think the lousiest videogames can be considered art. Because bad games with no fun aren't really games, by definition.

I OPM Speaking of the Mori Museum, there's an exhibit going on there right now on Hiroshi Sugimoto. One of the placards on a photograph of a mathematically inspired sculpture has a quote of Sugimoto's that says, "Art resides even in things with no artistic intentions." So it's reasonable to suggest that a game has just as much opportunity to be art as an apple on a plate.
I HK You know, with videogames becoming something that anyone can play at any time because they've become so popular and mainstream in our lives, I think contemporary artists out there could use videogames and create art—like *The Refusing Chair*, the unplayable videogame. It's there, it looks playable, but you just can't control it.

I OPM Recently you had a chance to meet up with Frank Miller when he was in Japan to promote *Sin City*, the movie. Do you like Frank Miller's work?
I HK My favorite one is *Hard Boiled*, for which he only wrote the script and story. I love this stuff because although it is an American comic, it's got a French flavor.

I OPM What was it like meeting him?
I HK He was a very nice guy. He's a big fan of Japanese manga and comics, really, and his style is very different from typical American comics; you can see it in his cuts and the layout. And since he likes Japanese comics, he sort of does not use a lot of colors...

I OPM ...or backgrounds.
I HK Right. And with Japanese manga, the person who writes the story and does the art is usually the same. So it's really that person's piece of work. But most American comics, until Frank Miller, were more like a production line, where you have the storyteller, the scriptwriter, the artist, and, if you need, another artist to finish it up. But with Frank Miller, he wanted to do it Japanese style, where he did everything. He's like the first person who did it in American comics.

When he started doing that, doing everything himself, he was really bashed in the industry for not doing it the American way. But with his success, he really opened this new path where one person could do everything and make it that person's work, instead of putting it on a production line. Like the main characters of his comics, many of them end up dying. That's not American. In American Hollywood films, they never die, the main protagonists. He basically opened this new path in the American comics industry

I OPM Are you familiar with Frank Miller's graphic novel *Ronin*?
I HK [*Laughs*] I know it, but I haven't read it yet.

I OPM It's sort of a parallel to Miller himself, since he started out working for the major companies, like Marvel and DC, and then struck out on his own.
I HK Frank Miller is a fan of a Japanese samurai series...what's it called in the States?

I OPM *Lone Wolf and Cub*? He helped bring that series to the United States. Like how Quentin Tarantino might executive-produce a Robert Rodriguez film, Frank Miller got Dark Horse Comics to translate and publish *Lone Wolf and Cub* for the States.
I HK He did? That's interesting.

I OPM Back to your earlier years -- you were you an only child?
I HK I have an older brother. He's two years older.

I OPM So are you and your brother very different then?
I HK I think so, and I always thought so, but I really don't know.

I OPM Did he have a key around his neck, too?
I HK [*Laughs*] He must have, but I remember I was always the one using my key to get in the house, so he was probably still at school. He is only two years older, but when he was my age, [the age] when I felt very lonely, my mom was not working. My parents' generation, many years ago in Japan, the husband, the father, went out and worked, like America in the 1950s. Like now, even in Japan, women work. There are equal-employment rights, and people can take maternity leave, etc. But 30 years ago when Japan was going through a major economic boom, that's when women started to work, maybe not full time, but that's when kids started wearing their straps and became kagi-ko.

Now, most kids' parents both work, but back then, it was only a small portion, only a few kids in each class had both parents working. That's why I felt even more lonely, like the kagi-kos formed a "kagi-ko alliance," like, "We're very lonely; we have our keys around our necks." When I was small, in elementary school, if it was sunny in the morning but ended up raining in the afternoon, most kids' moms came to school with another umbrella to pick them up, but my mom was working, so she never came. So I ended up having small umbrellas in my bag. But then if I took it out and used it, it looked like, "Oh, Hideo, your mom's not coming." I didn't like that; it was embarrassing, so I ended up walking home in the rain without using my umbrella.

> "BEING THE SECOND CHILD IN THE FAMILY, I JUST HATED BEING THE OPPRESSED ONE."

I OPM So you'd go home soaking wet to prove a point?
I HK [*Laughs*] Yeah, a little bit, I guess. You could say that. Being the second child in the family, I just hated being the oppressed one. I always wanted to fight back. When my mom said, "Do as your big brother does, follow the rules." No way. [*Laughs*]

Our interview came to an end and our photographer began to situate Kojima in his apartment. It is a modestly and spaciously appointed affair, with a couple of red leather chairs set against a mostly stark-white backdrop. Lots of Kojima memorabilia accents the room, with *Zone of the Enders* statues bookending the huge Hitachi widescreen TV resting in his living room and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* promotional materials making up the bulk of the rest of the display.

But it's the little things that really offer a peek into Kojima's life: a 12-inch single of New Order's "Fine Time" and a signed and numbered certificate commemorating a Joy Division cover designed by Factory Records' influential Peter Saville. As the photo session wrapped up, we shook hands with Kojima and thanked him for inviting us into his home for this special meeting, a meeting that brought us closer to him not only as a creative force in the game industry, but as a human being, as a man. While he threatens with each and every installment of the *Metal Gear* series to move on and let someone else take the reins of gaming's favorite stealthy son, it will always be Kojima looking out from behind Solid Snake's eyes. How could it be otherwise? He's gaming's original one-man army. ▌

TARO OKAMOTO

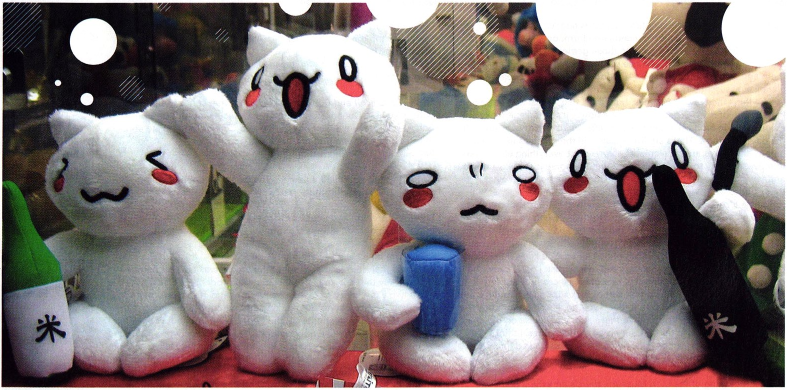
One of Japan's most famous postwar artists, Taro Okamoto lived from 1911 to 1996, creating many compelling sculptures and images that have stuck in Kojima's mind.

ARTFUL DODGERS

Techno supergroup Underworld and, more specifically, their art-house collective TOMATO conceived an import-only PlayStation 2 game that is less a game and more a collage of sound and images, but not in a *Rez*-like way.

MORI ART MUSEUM

The 54th floor of the Roppongi Hills main tower holds the lavish Mori Art Museum, which hosts exhibits ranging from da Vinci's cryptic works to Hiroshi Sugimoto's high-concept photo collections to Vivienne Westwood fashion retrospectives (www.tokyocityview.com/en/topics/20051123-01/topimg1.jpg).



J-TOWN

GAMING NEWS FROM THE EAST

UMD MANIA

A few months ago, "adult" UMD movies became available in Japan for the PSP, which showed that Sony was willing to—if not endorse—at least quietly accept dicier content that gave its system an, um, competitive advantage in the adult gamer market. After the runaway success of the first set, a new batch arrived this November with an exciting new feature: dirt-cheap pricing. Titles such as *Naughty Driving School Instructor* and *High School Girl Master Hunter* carry an MSRP of 980 yen (about $9) and can be found in stores for as little as 830 yen.

This is good news for more than just stingy perverts. If UMD movies are being sold with an MSRP of less than $10, then UMD publishers are making a profit at that price. Pornography is always at the vanguard of new technologies, so if $10 "adult" movies are possible today, then $10 "real" movies and superbudget greatest-hits games can't be far behind. Some analysts were concerned that Sony's proprietary UMD format would be expensive to produce almost indefinitely. But less than a year later, Sony has the manufacturing lines and production capacity to make $10 UMDs a reality. Good to see it's worked out all the kinks.

ON MOLDOVAN POP MUSIC AND DRUNKEN CATS

This is a story about three boys from Moldova (established in 1991 with a population of 3.3 million) who found international fame and fortune through somewhat unconventional means. Their boy band O-Zone wrote a Romanian pop song called "Dragostea Din Tei," which roughly translates to "Love Among the Linden Trees." The song quickly rode its brain-searingly catchy chorus to the top of the European charts.

Two Internet memes soon brought the song to distant shores. In America, the song became known as the "Numa Numa Dance" thanks to a webcam video of an overweight boy cutting loose from his computer chair. In Japan, the song inspired a completely separate, unrelated Internet meme. Posters on the megalithic message forum 2ch (ni-channel) made a Flash animation called "Maiahi" that stars 2ch's ASCII-art cat mascot, Mona. In the animation, Mona acts out what the Romanian lyrics "sound" like in Japanese. Shoehorning Japanese lyrics into a Romanian song led to some fairly absurdist scenarios, including guest appearances from Picasso, a llama, and even *Street Fighter II*'s Dhalsim. This animation inspired dozens of parodies and remakes and soon reached the attention of the mainstream media, much like how the "All Your Base" meme swept America.

Here things take a turn for the surreal. Rather than shrug off the animation as a fluke, O-Zone and its new Japanese label, Avex, embraced it wholeheartedly. O-Zone launched its Japanese career based on a black-and-white, ASCII-art Flash animation from a Japanese message forum. The Flash animation played on the Shibuya 109, the several-stories tall skyscraper television towering over the world's busiest crosswalk. For the Japanese market, several famous DJs remixed the song, and the band launched its Japanese-language website at maiahi.com. This fall, Avex started selling tiny stuffed ASCII-faced cats, complete with beer bottle and reddened cheeks, from ubiquitous kiosks looping "Maiahi."

> THE LINE BETWEEN SUBCULTURE AND MAINSTREAM ISN'T JUST THIN—IT'S NONEXISTENT.

Nowadays, the line between subculture and mainstream culture isn't just thin—it's nonexistent. Games that can capture the public's attention, such as Nintendo's quirky *Nintendogs*, can break out beyond the core gamer audience in a matter of weeks. By embracing the quirky phenomenon that propelled it to Japanese fame rather than rejecting it as "uncool," O-Zone was able to build on an existing fan base that already knew and loved its music...or at least crazy ASCII cats.

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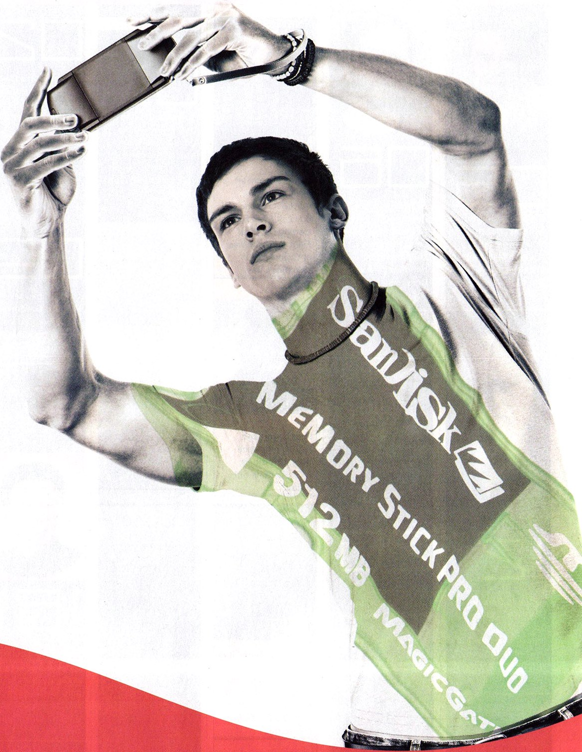

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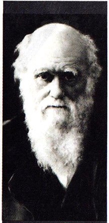
FEBRUARY 06

THE MONTH AHEAD FOR YOU AND YOUR PLAYSTATION

SUNDAY

05

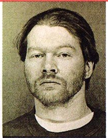
It's **Super Bowl Sunday**, not that you nerds care. It's also **National Weatherman's Day**, not that you nerds ever go outside.



12

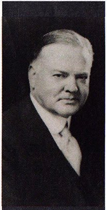
Today is **Darwin Day**. Try and disprove Mr. Darwin's theory of evolution by doing something stupid and seeing if you survive it.

MONDAY



06

OPM wishes a happy birthday to the guy whose song titles we keep using as headlines—**Axl Rose** was born 44 years ago today.

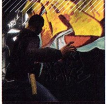


20

Hoover's your daddy? Let's hear it for old, rich white guys with a shout-out for **Presidents' Day**.

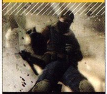
TUESDAY

NEW GAMES



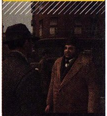
14

If your sweetheart really loves you, maybe he or she will buy you ***Marc Ecko's Getting Up, Final Fight X: Streetwise,*** or ***Grandia III*** for **Valentine's Day.**



21

Insert overused AC/DC reference here. Criterion's FPS, ***Black,*** is out today.



28

Celebrate **Mardi Gras** with ***Stacked*** and ***24: The Game.*** And sleep with a horse's head tonight: Tomorrow ***The Godfather*** comes out.

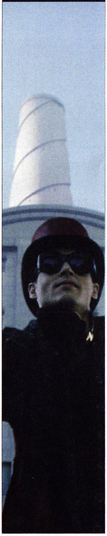
NEW GAMES

WEDNESDAY

NEW FLICKS

01

Today is the day that Willy Wonka gave the famous tour of his chocolate factory. Go eat an Everlasting Gobstopper!



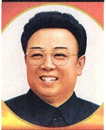
THURSDAY

02

Groundhog's Day! If you're a groundhog, congratulations—you get the day off.

09

Give thanks to **William G. Morgan,** who invented volleyball on this date in 1895.



16

Kim Jong Il claims today is his 64th birthday, but he actually turns 65. And to think—he doesn't look a day over 70.

FRIDAY

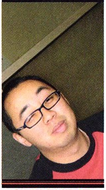
NEW FLICKS

10

Red alert! Avoid all movie theaters, as ***Curious George,*** a lame remake of ***The Pink Panther,*** and ***Final Destination 3*** come out.

24

Who's the ***Alpha Dog***? Justin Timberlake wants you to think it's him, but we know the truth: It's Scooter.



NEW FLICKS

SATURDAY

04

The world's first sci-fi television program aired today in 1938. It was based on the play ***R.U.R.,*** which coined the term "robot."

25

Sean Astin was born today. Today is also the day that the **Colt revolver** was patented. Sadly, there is no connection between these events.

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METAL GEAR SOLID 3:

Pub. Konami **Dev.** Kojima Productions **Release** Spring

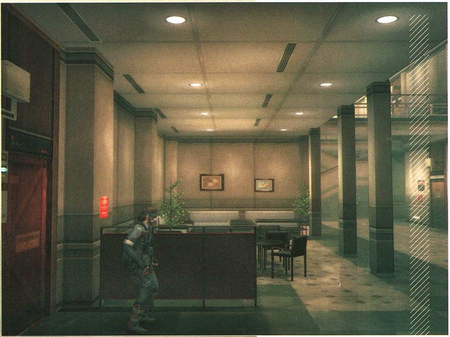
SUBSISTENCE

While many rereleases beef up the original experience by adding a slew of new features to the core game (*RE4*'s jump to PS2, Xbox's *Ninja Gaiden Black*), it looks like Kojima is trying to set an example by going all-out with *MGS3: Subsistence*. We know for sure that in Japan *Subsistence* will come with three discs: "Subsistence," which is the third-person-camera-enhanced version of *MGS3: Snake Eater*; "Persistence," where you'll find the Metal Gear Online multiplayer mode, plus additional extras (the secret theater and the *Metal Gear* games); and "Existence," which features all of *MGS3*'s cutscenes edited into a continuous three-hour movie. The Existence disc is for gamers who want to experience *MGS3*'s story without having to, uh, actually play *MGS3*. At press time, it's still unknown whether the American release will include Existence disc as well.

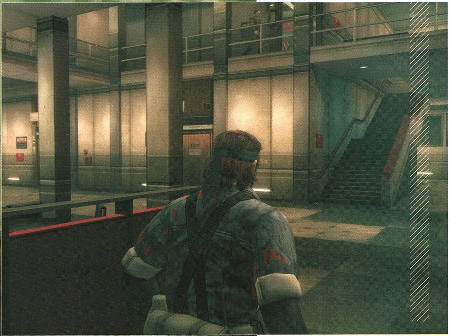
We got some hands-on time with the Subsistence disc (enough to get to the fight with the Fear), and we're pleased with the new third-person camera. For comparison's sake (like what you can see in the screens on this page), you can just hit R3 to toggle between the original bird's-eye view and the new third-person camera. While we always assumed that the new camera would be pretty cool, we underestimated its impact.

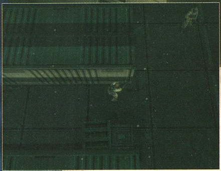
For one thing, the bird's-eye camera didn't convey the proper scale since, well, it was from a bird's perspective. Parking the camera right behind (or around) Snake makes the game environments feel much more lush and immersive. All of that swaying grass that Snake would hide in looks much taller and feels downright cozy once your view is level with Snake's.

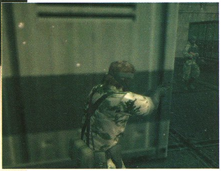
Because you can spin the camera around (à la *Splinter Cell*'s), situational awareness is much better. Previously, the camera had a very limited range of movement, and you had to make use of either the first-person view or one of several gadgets to find baddies. While you can still do either, it's now pretty easy to just swing the camera around and notice enemies and objects on the horizon instead. For example, in Bolshaya Past Base (the small base with the electrified fence right before the first boss fight with Revolver Ocelot), you can see far enough to notice the parked helicopter way over on the other side. Heck, this almost makes the game easier at points, as you can now see most soldiers before they can see you. However, when you go into buildings (like the Graniny Gorki Lab), putting the camera right around Snake in an enclosed space makes things a bit harder to control, as the walls limit your situational awareness. The bird's-eye view is actually better suited for these situations. But overall, the camera makes such a significant difference that we cut our playtime off at the Fear so that we can savor the rest of the game later.

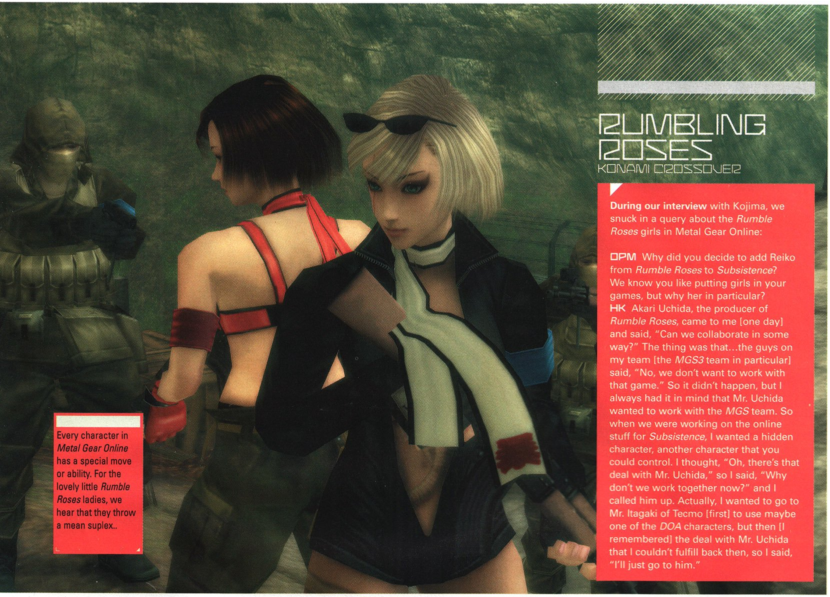


THE NEW MOVABLE CAMERA MAKES SITUATION AWARENESS MUCH EASIER....









Every character in *Metal Gear Online* has a special move or ability. For the lovely little *Rumble Roses* ladies, we hear that they throw a mean suplex..

RUMBLING ROSES

KONAMI CROSSOVER

During our interview with Kojima, we snuck in a query about the *Rumble Roses* girls in Metal Gear Online:

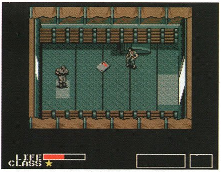
OPM Why did you decide to add Reiko from *Rumble Roses* to *Subsistence*? We know you like putting girls in your games, but why her in particular?

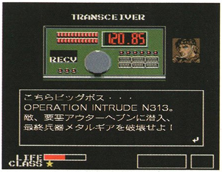
HK Akari Uchida, the producer of *Rumble Roses*, came to me [one day] and said, "Can we collaborate in some way?" The thing was that...the guys on my team [the *MGS3* team in particular] said, "No, we don't want to work with that game." So it didn't happen, but I always had it in mind that Mr. Uchida wanted to work with the *MGS* team. So when we were working on the online stuff for *Subsistence*, I wanted a hidden character, another character that you could control. I thought, "Oh, there's that deal with Mr. Uchida," so I said, "Why don't we work together now?" and I called him up. Actually, I wanted to go to Mr. Itagaki of Tecmo [first] to use maybe one of the *DOA* characters, but then [I remembered] the deal with Mr. Uchida that I couldn't fulfill back then, so I said, "I'll just go to him."

OLDER SNAKE

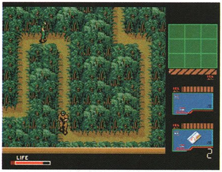
BLASTS FROM THE PAST

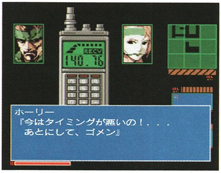
For the first time, the "authentic" Japanese versions of *Metal Gear* and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* will be available in the States. *Metal Gear* suffered a horrible translation (e.g., "I FEEL ASLEEP!") and some odd changes in its first trip Stateside, while *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* never came out here. Over in Japan, both games were recently released in cell-phone format, and we're guessing that the enhanced cell-phone versions are the basis for these upcoming U.S. versions. For *Metal Gear*, the cell-phone version added both new difficulty settings (an easy mode) and Boss Survival mode, which lets you fight all the bosses in succession. Additionally, the famous "Infinite Bandana" from the *MGS* series makes an appearance. The cell-phone version of *Metal Gear 2* also received the additional difficulty setting and boss modes, as well as tweaked appearances of characters. In the original MSX version, character portrait icons on the radio resembled movie stars, but now these portraits are based on *MGS* illustrator Yoji Shinkawa's designs. Additionally, the cell-phone version of *MG2* has minor gameplay tweaks, such as item icon changes, changes in land-mine usage, and visual indicators that display variances in sound when walking over certain types of terrain. On top of all this, both games will sport a fresh translation that is more in tune with Kojima's vision.





こちらビッグボス・・・
OPERATION INTRUDE N313。
敵、要塞アウターヘブンに潜入、
最終兵器メタルギアを破壊せよ！





ホーリー
『今はタイミングが悪いの！．．．
あとにして、ゴメン』

What these soldiers don't know, and what we'll tell you so that we both enter into a secret-sharing pact, is that Raikov is wearing a thong in this picture. Indeed..

RAIDEN RAVE

RAIDEN IS A COOL DUDE, REALLY! KOJIMA'S NOT JOKING!

When we talked with Mr. Kojima, we asked him some questions about his most controversial character, Raiden:

OPM What is it about Raiden and you nowadays? He's in that [secret theater short] in *Subsistence*, "Metal Gear Raiden" [Kojima also referred to it as "MGS3: Snake Eraser" at TGS—*Ed.*], where he appears in this amalgamation of cut-scenes but is screwing everything up, which results in the colonel shouting "TIME PARADOX!" every time he does so. He's the most severely punished character in that scenario. You never intended for him to be the source of such derision, but now that he is, you've picked up the baton and run with it and are clearly enjoying yourself by doing it. When did you decide, "OK, I'm gonna mess with Raiden, too"?
HK The thing is, I don't hate him. I fool around with him because [my team and I] like him; we spent a lot of time putting him together. But the fans ended up not liking him, and that I accept. Since I want my fans to enjoy my games, [I said to] myself—who came up with the character—"Why not fool around with him?" I tried to cast him in some cool role in [*Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*], but it just didn't work. That's why now I'll make him the clown in the movies.

OPM And you recast him as Raikov in *MGS3*. So for *Subsistence*, who decided to make Raikov—at least in the online portion of *Subsistence*—impervious to men's magazines? [A popular tactic in *Subsistence* multiplayer is throwing down *Playboy*-style magazines to distract the enemy—Raikov is immune to their alluring effect—*Ed.*]
HK I decided. [*Laughs*] The whole thing with Raiden/Raikov in *MGS3* is that there are actually many people in Japan who like Raiden. There are people who want to play as Snake, but there are also people who want to play as Raiden. But I wasn't going to do the same thing as [in] *MGS2*, where you [have] to play with Raiden, because I know [some] fans do not like him. That's why I basically put Raikov in the game, so you could see Raiden, and [why I] also offered the mask, so people who wanted to play as Raiden can have Snake wear the mask.

OPM Since you have this virtual cast of characters, do you foresee bringing Raiden back for *MGS4*?
HK Raiden is going to be in *Metal Gear Solid 4*. But it doesn't mean you're going to control Raiden.

> "RAIDEN IS GOING TO BE IN METAL GEAR SOLID 4."

OPM Is it the real Raiden who will appear in *MGS4*, or just a character who looks like him?
HK It is that Raiden, not someone who looks like Raiden. But I'm going to announce here, I'm going to make [it very] clear, that once you finish playing *MGS4*, you're going to like Raiden very much.

OPM It's interesting to see how you're putting such effort into salvaging Raiden's reputation. It's like *Saving Private Raiden*.
HK The thing is, I always knew I was going to do that with Raiden in *MGS4*—that's why I can humiliate him as much as I want to with "Metal Gear Raiden," because I knew that I was going to make people like him after *MGS4*. Knowing that there's going to be that comeback, I could do whatever I wanted to him in "Metal Gear Raiden." |

METAL GEAR ACID 2

PEELING AWAY SNAKE'S NEXT PSP ADVENTURE

Pub. Konami **Dev.** Kojima Productions **Release** Spring

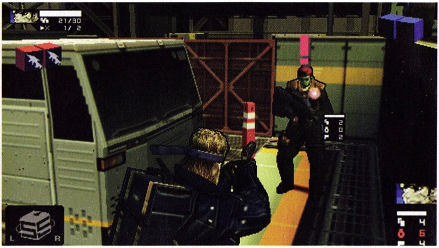
The upcoming *Metal Gear Acid 2* from Kojima Productions doesn't just feature polished visuals (in the form of neon-glowing, cartoony graphics)—the turn-based tactical card game also features several tweaks based on user input and other all-new gameplay elements. An intriguing new "real-time" aspect brings a new level of tension to sneaking around security cameras and guards—if they see you before your turn ends, you're screwed; the baddies will now actively track and follow you as a result, and you can't redo your move (before, even if you were spotted, as long as you ended your turn in a hiding place, the enemy basically didn't see you). Hey, just be more cautious next time.

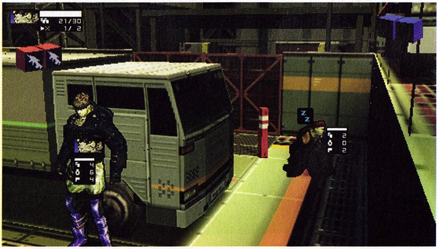
Acid 2 also deals out more than twice as many cards as its predecessor during the course of the game; some massively impact gameplay while others are just there for fun. As you progress, you'll be able to upgrade cards, which lets you specialize in favorite tactics and customize your play style. Load up on the big guns and tough body armor to blast your way through a level, or deal yourself a stack of trap and support cards to take a stealthier approach. Certain cards will transform into more-powerful cards as you upgrade them, but be aware that you'll often trade power for speed or vice versa. Equipment slots on the playable characters allow them to wear armor or automatically counterstrike when attacked (you're going to be grateful for that; trust us).

The environments also play a part in the mission levels to an unprecedented degree, posing new challenges for the player. One mission takes place in a train yard, with trains going by every few turns. It's tough enough dealing with your opponents, but don't let them distract you too much—if you happen to get caught on the tracks while a train goes by, it's curtains for Snake.

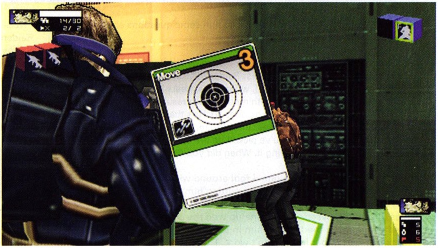
The game also has a whole new mode that will appeal to fans of the *MGS* series: a single-player "Arena mode" that pits Snake against bosses from past games, such as Revolver Ocelot (both old and young) and Vamp (from *MGS2*). But don't go into these battles unprepared, because these guys are *tough*. Winning will earn you special cards.

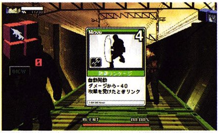
Finally, there's the new scope peripheral that ships with every copy, tentatively called "Solid Eye," a device that warrants a little explanation. It's basically like a pair of stand-alone 3D glasses that can be mounted on top of the PSP for "Theater mode." With it, you'll be able to watch the movies that come with the game, including the eight-minute *MGS4* trailer. Oh, and there are (3D!) girlie magazines in the game, too—this time in the form of short movies that you can unlock with various cards. You see, Snake is a lover as well as a fighter.

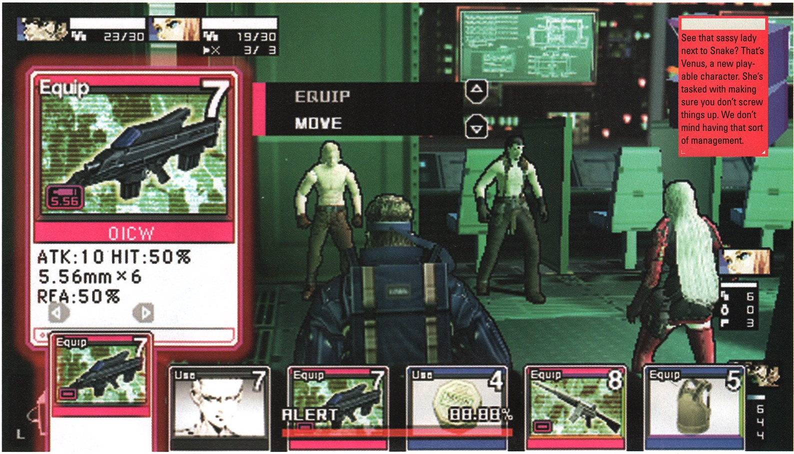




OH, AND THERE ARE 3D GIRLIE MAGAZINES IN THE GAME AS WELL....



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MOVE
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4
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8
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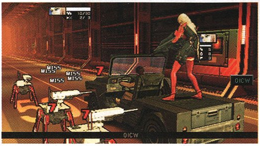
5
ALERT
L

See that sassy lady next to Snake? That's Venus, a new playable character. She's tasked with making sure you don't screw things up. We don't mind having that sort of management.


MISS
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OICW

女だ。ここの研究者のようだが……。

60
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88.88%

SELECT TARGET
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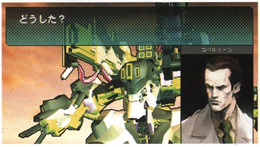
HIT
ALERT
88.88%



どうした？

Move
4
ATKリンケージ
自動発動
ATK+10

RPG REVOLUTION

9 GAMES TO TIDE YOU OVER UNTIL FFXII

PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE

TAKING A UNIVERSE ONLINE

Pub. Sega **Dev.** Sonic Team **Release** Summer

We've lamented the lack of online options in RPGs, with the field limited to *Final Fantasy XI*, *EverQuest Online Adventures*, and various online multiplayer features in games like *Champions: Return to Arms*. Sega did an admirable job of creating an addictive multiplayer online action-RPG, *Phantasy Star Online*—except *PSO* was on pretty much every system except the PS2. Now, with *Phantasy Star Universe* Sega is making up for the lack of a PS2 *Phantasy Star*.

The single-player story involves Ethan (you) fighting space baddies called "the SEED" who're tearing through the Graal star system. Ethan zips around the system, fights monsters, and does all sorts of heroic stuff during the approximately 40-hour adventure.

After that, you can jump into the online game, which takes place five years later. You choose a race—human, newman (er, space elves), cast (robots), or beast (melee shapeshifters)—get your own little pad, and go to the lobby to create a party. With up to five other players, you zip around looking for dungeons to explore and boss monsters to fight and loot. *PSO* veterans will be pleased with additions like strafing, dual-wielding, drivable vehicles (!), and target lock-on to make combat more manageable. So far, *PSU* feels like a good reason to keep your Network Adaptor plugged in.

GRANDIA III

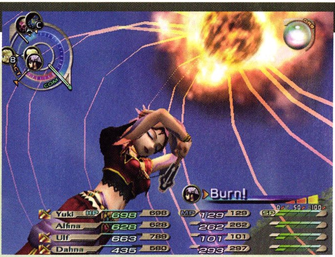
A GRAND BATTLE

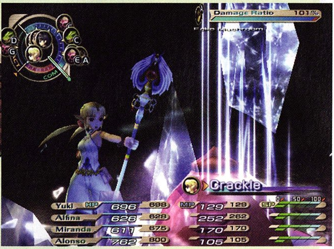
Pub. Square Enix **Dev.** Game Arts **Release** March

The *Grandia* franchise has been one in which a pretty good RPG on another platform makes an unremarkable transition to the Sony platform. While the Saturn version of *Grandia* and the Dreamcast version of *Grandia II* were generally superior to their Sony counterparts, the next *Grandia* is built for the PS2, and it shows.

The screens show the general improvements to the graphics, but the game's true charm is evident in the combat system. After being reacquainted with the battle system, we felt immediately comfortable and went on to check out its improvements. A quick refresher: It's a semi-turn-based and real-time system where the player waits in real time for a chance to issue a command. Then there is a brief window between issuing a command and executing it; being attacked during this interval can either counter the move or outright cancel it, which forces the subject to wait for a chance to issue a command again. The result is a slick battle system that adds a new tactical layer of trying to cancel enemies' attacks while making sure they don't cancel yours. One major improvement is the use of aerial combos—if you time them correctly, not only can you knock an enemy into the air (via a cancel), but another party member can attack the enemy in midair, resulting in a slick special attack that causes increased damage. Consider it a visual reward for pulling off a powerful attack.

Also, *Grandia III* might have the quirky distinction of featuring the goofiest family connection in an RPG yet—frankly, it surprised us when we asked about the sassy young redhead who makes smart-aleck quips with the main character, Yuki, and the producer answered, "That's his mother." If nothing else, *Grandia III* shows that young mothers and their sons can have a grand RPG adventure as well.


Burn!
Yuki HP 698 698 MP 129 129 SP
Alfina 628 628 262 262
Ulf 663 789 101 101
Dahna 435 580 293 297


Damage Ratio 101%
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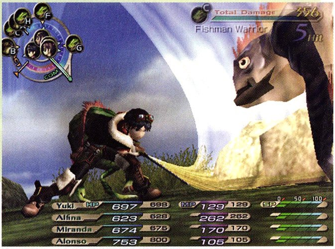
Yuki HP 696 698 MP 129 129 SP
Alfina 626 628 252 262
Miranda 611 675 170 170
Alonso 762 800 105 105


Total Damage 356
Fishman Warrior
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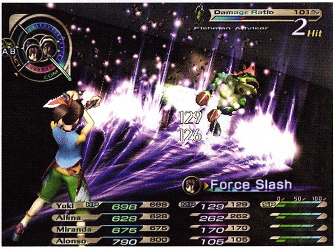
Yuki HP 697 698 MP 129 129 SP
Alfina 623 628 262 262
Miranda 674 675 170 170
Alonso 753 800 105 105


Damage Ratio 101%
2 Hit
129
126
Force Slash
Yuki HP 698 698 MP 129 129 SP
Alfina 628 628 262 262
Miranda 675 675 170 170
Alonso 790 800 105 105

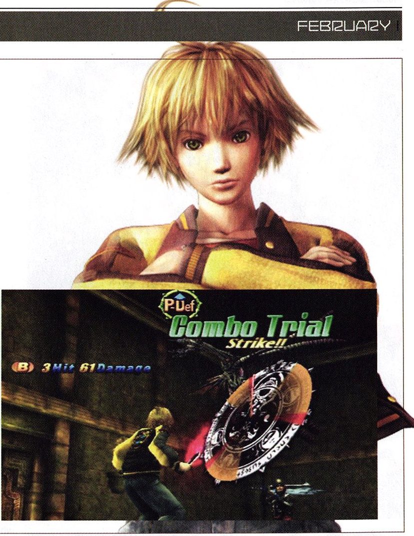
SHADOW HEARTS: FROM THE NEW WORLD

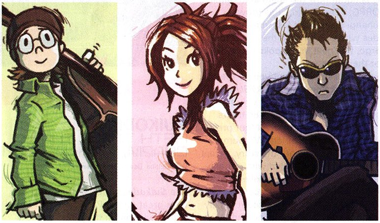
USA! USA! USA!

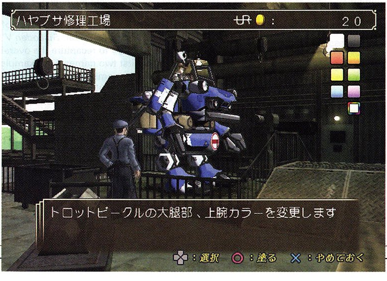
Pub. XSEED **Dev.** Nautilus **Release** March

The ***Shadow Hearts*** series has made quite a name for itself as of late. *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* (the second title) seems to have been the series' breakout game in many respects—thanks in large part to its odd charm and different take on the typical RPG combat system. What other game has a dog wearing a trucker hat in reference (or maybe not) to Terry Bogard from *The King of Fighters* or a couple of fancy lads who demand that you bring them semipornographic cards? None that we can think of, and fortunately, *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* seemingly carries on with the madness, this time in a whole new land of wonder known as the United States of America.

That's right. You'll be traveling these here United States in *From the New World*—hitting New York, Chicago, Las Vegas, and the Grand Canyon—in what appears to be the 1920s, give or take a decade (or several). So Times Square looks much as it did dozens of years ago, but now with a Native American named Shania—who can apparently shape-shift into a spirit form—roaming the mean 1920s streets of Brooklyn. The main character, Johnny Garland, isn't quite as fantastical. He's basically your run-of-the-mill 16-year-old boy detective who, while on a case, witnesses something that would make most people have a heart attack and die on the spot—although that wouldn't make for much of an RPG, would it?






ハヤブサ修理工場
20
トロットビークルの大腿部、上腕カラーを変更します

STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

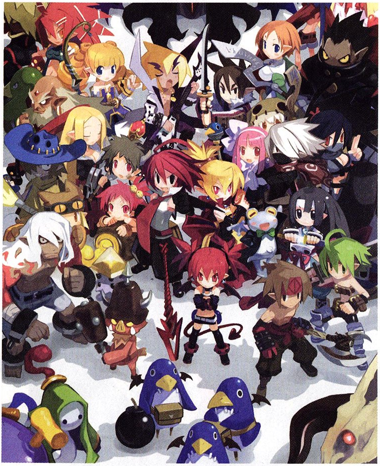
WHO WANTS BUMPY TROTS? (WE DO!)

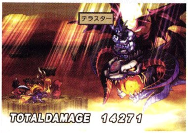
Pub. Atlus **Dev.** Irem **Release** Spring

You know what's missing from giant robot videogames? The ability to play harmonica and dress up in rad overalls, that's what. Good thing we have Atlus on duty: Its upcoming action-adventure, *Steambot Chronicles* (*Ponkotsu Roman Daikatsugeki Bumpy Trot* in Japan) lets you dress like a bumpkin and pretend to be a street musician in between punching the crap out of bad guys with your massive, powered armored robot suit.

Steambot puts you in control of a young man who finds himself washed ashore after an attack at sea, and the only way he can put things right is to take control of a mech suit and pound his way to victory. Your hero and his armor are highly customizable, and every upgrade or modification you make affects both your performance and appearance.

The quest is open-ended and varied, and between battles (which use a dual-stick configuration somewhere between *Virtua On*'s and *Katamari Damacy*'s) you'll find yourself playing a variety of instruments in a wide array of rhythm-based minigames. Quirky? Sure, but it's fun, too...the best kind of quirkiness.





49dm
BONUS 0
+SUN 0

DISGAEA 2: GEO TACTICS

MARCH OF THE PRINNIES

Pub. NIS America **Dev.** Nippon Ichi **Release** August

Disgaea 2: Geo Tactics is coming, and it's promising to be as big as the first game. It features the same geo panel system—but with new penalties like instant death—as well as geo symbol monsters that move geo panels around...or destroy them. Also new is the Dark Court add-on to the Dark Assembly (the bizarre Senate portion of the first game), where you'll have to defend party members against charges brought against them midbattle. New stackable characters allow towers of combatants to attack as one. You'll be controlling both Adel and Etna, who are working together to restore the cursed world of Valdime—he wants to save it, she wishes to conquer it.

緑 増殖
14dm
BONUS 0
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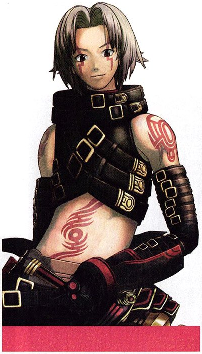
ネビロス／ニセ者
HP 1300/1300
SP 190/190
ATK 355 DEF 214
INT 276 RES 237
HIT 256 SPD 217
LV 37
COUNTER 1 MV 3 JM 17
（武器）
（その他）
（その他）
（その他）

26
TOTAL DAMAGE 26



.HACK//GU

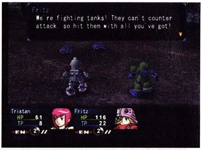
GROWING UP IS HARD TO DO

Pub. Bandai **Dev.** CyberConnect **Release** Spring

Director Hiroshi Matsumaya of CyberConnect claims that the "GU" in *.hack//GU* stands for "grow up." He's hinted that while several other meanings for the letters will show up, the heart of the game is about how the fictional in-game MMORPG, "The World," has grown and changed since the last *.hack* series. Besides whatever growth the characters undergo, this next *.hack* looks like a step up for the series.

In a similar-but-different vein to the previous *.hack* tetralogy, *.hack//GU* will be a trilogy. Except *.hack//GU Volume I: Resurrection* is already about 80 hours long (making it longer than all four previous *.hack* games combined). Matsumaya wouldn't say much about the story, except that The World is now filled with not only player killers, but also player killer killers (or PKKs). Details on the new combat system and the story itself (you seem to play as Haseo, a PKK who gets schooled by a PK named Tri-Edge, who himself greatly resembles the previous *.hack* games' hero, Kite), however, are scarce.

誰だっ！！？



Fritz

We're fighting tanks! They can't counter attack, so hit them with all you've got!

MS SAGA: A NEW DAWN

NOT ANOTHER GUNDAM ACTION GAME

Pub. Bandai **Dev.** BEC **Release** February

Rather than force another clunky action game down the throats of *Gundam* fans, Bandai's next *Battle Suit* game is (surprise!) a traditional turn-based RPG.

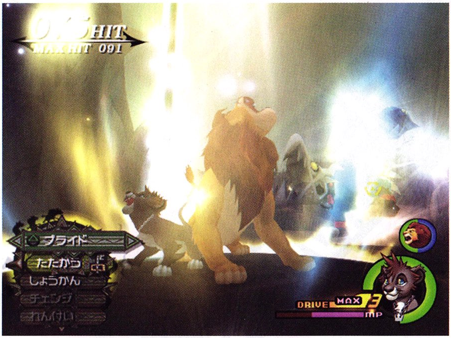
In *MS Saga*, almost anyone is able to own a Gundam, so you find and recruit noble pilots to help you in your cause. *MS Saga* will feature fully customizable mobile suits from the *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *G Gundam*, and *Gundam Wing* series.

SUIKODEN V

FIFTH TIME'S THE CHARM, YEAH REALLY!

Pub. Konami **Dev.** Konami **Release** Fall

The *Suikoden* series started off pretty darn great on the PlayStation and then stumbled a bit on the PS2. The slow yet promising *Suikoden III* gave way to the way-simplified (to the point of feeling almost like a "my first RPG" type of game) *Suikoden IV*. So far, *Suikoden V* looks like it'll try to recapture the overall feel of the first two games. For example, while *IV* limits combat to four characters in your party, *V* will go back to letting you have six out at a time. Additionally, the perspective is now from above, which makes *V* look a bit like a fancy 3D-ified version of *I* or *II*. Hopefully, this return to basics will help *Suikoden V* make a mark in the RPG market.


HIT
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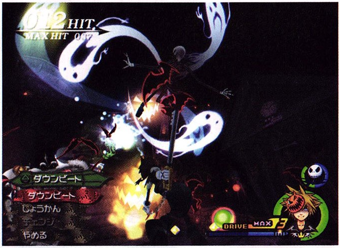
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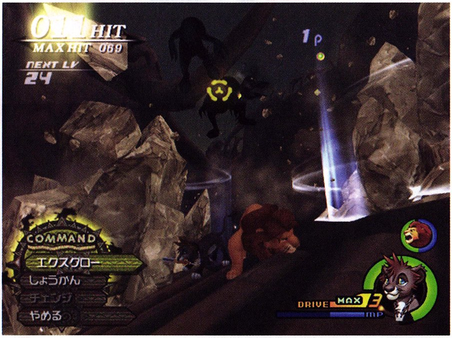
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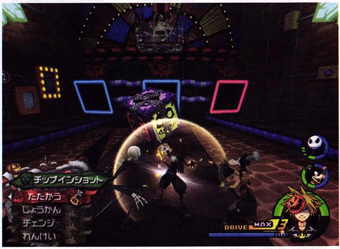
チップインショット
たたかう
しょうかん
チェンジ
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DRIVE MAX 3

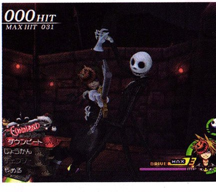
KINGDOM HEARTS II

PRIDE OF THE LITTER

Pub. Square Enix **Dev.** Square Enix **Release** Spring

Yep, here it is, Sora and Simba, together at last. Nomura loves him some lions and has put Pride Rock into the game. While we've already told you Donald turns into a flying bird (à la Zazu from the original *Lion King*) and Goofy becomes a tortoise, we now see that Pete becomes a shifty-looking lion. It's pretty cool to see Pete adapt to the Disney world along with Sora and his buddies.

Additionally, Sora will again be visiting Jack and his crew in Halloweentown (does that make Nomura one of those hipster punks who always wears *Nightmare Before Christmas* clothes?). Except this time, the world will follow the movie's plot a little more closely; unlike in the first *KH*, Santa Claus makes an appearance in Halloweentown, and Sora and Jack will have to save him from Oogie Boogie. We haven't seen a spooky Pete, but it's safe to assume he'll be deaded up for this level, and we'd like to take this moment to reflect on how *KH2* looks so snazzy that screens of the Halloweentown level look a lot like movie stills from the original *Nightmare Before Christmas*. Come back next month to check out more worlds and characters, and maybe some hands-on with the Japanese release!

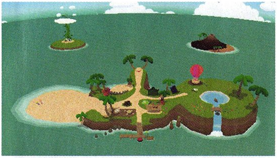

000 HIT
MAX HIT 031
COMMAND
ダウンビート
しょうかん
チェンジ
やめる
DRIVE MAX 3

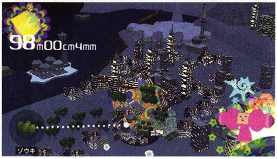
A FISTFUL OF UMDS

GET READY FOR SOME PSP LOVE

UMD
UNIVERSAL MEDIA DISC
MAGICGATE

A COUPLE MONTHS BACK, WE LAMENTED OVER HOW THE LAND OF THE RISING FUN WAS GETTING A WHOLE BUNCH OF COOL PSP GAMES, FROM WEIRD LANGUAGE-TRANSLATORS LIKE TALKMAN TO OLD-SCHOOL GAMES LIKE GOKU MAKAIMURA (EXTREME GHOULS 'N' GHOSTS), WHILE OUR PROSPECTS WERE MUCH MORE SLIM. WELL, SOMEONE LISTENED, BECAUSE THERE'S A HOST OF SLICK GAMES COMING TO OUR SIDE OF THE OCEAN. WE'RE CELEBRATING THEIR ARRIVAL BY DEDICATING A TINY HAIKU TO EACH ONE—AFTER ALL, WE GIVETH AS WE TAKETH.





1002m48cm4mm
コジシ島

17m36cm0mm

ME & MY KATAMARI

LET'S ROLL

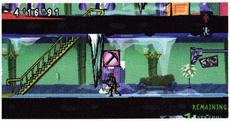
Pub. Namco **Dev.** Namco **Release** February

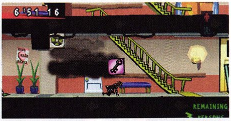
We're going on the record as saying that the hubbub over the control scheme for the PSP version of *Katamari* is just the result of a bunch of people who need actual problems to worry about. While it takes a little bit to get used to the different mechanic (your left thumb uses the D-pad and your right uses the Circle, Square, Triangle, and X buttons), it works remarkably well once you've had a few minutes to adjust, and you'll soon find yourself rolling happily through the tiny little environments.

Other than a few other basic additions (new cousins, some new environments, and a horrifyingly awesome new spread-eagle pose for the king that will haunt you in your sleep), this is the same *Katamari* you learned to love, now on your PSP. While it lacks a co-op option like the one added to *We Love Katamari,* you will be able to have competitive roll-offs with up to four players through Wi-Fi. Our favorite little addition, however, is in the credits. Now, as the names bounce across the screen, you can play a 2D side-scrolling version of katamari rolling, in which you jump over obstacles and avoid dropping your katamari down holes.

HAIKU:

Are three-metered balls
on a small screen as big as
they are on a large?





EXIT

TAKE THIS GAME AND SHOVE IT

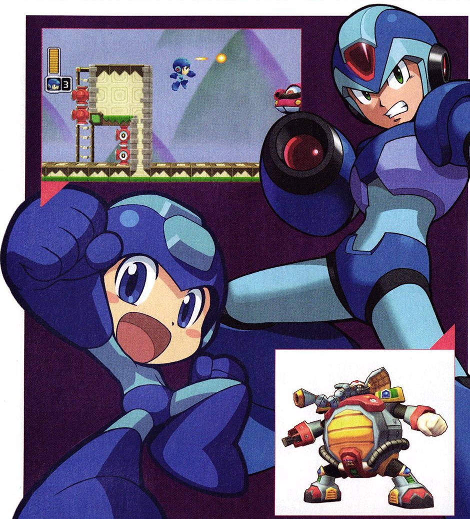
Pub. Ubisoft **Dev.** Taito **Release** February

With hurricanes, terrorism, tsunamis, and earthquakes threatening to make good on that guy on the street corner's claim that the world is ending soon, a game like *Exit* seems timely. No, you won't be saving the earth from doom in this game, but you do take on the role of a "professional rescuer" who can save people from any danger. As the black-clothed Mr. Esc (yes, after the very key), you'll move from disaster to disaster, rescuing poor schmucks from fires, quakes, and other fun times. *Exit* is an old-school 2D side-scroller (appropriate considering it's coming from the old-school master Taito), with you moving crates, climbing over ledges, shimmying up and down ropes and ladders, and, of course, running and jumping. One slip—taking a long tumble, being hit by falling debris, or getting burned—and you're dead. The 100 emergencies include old standbys like earthquakes and fires, and to help you get past some of them, Mr. Esc has the magical ability to turn victims into helpers (in order to push around really heavy crates).

If you think *Exit* sounds even the slightest bit familiar, you're right. In particular, the move-the-crates mechanic feels familiar, and that's because it goes way back to the 1980s with the Sega Genesis game called *Shove It!* (or *Sokoban*, as it was known in Japan). *Shove It!* is the classic crate pusher, where all you do is move boxes around to advance to the next level (there was also another variant of *Sokoban*, *Boxxle*, released for the Game Boy). Yeah, sort of like *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*. If you want to check out *Sokoban* or *Shove It*, just search for them on Google and then push and shove to your heart's content.

HAIKU:

Exit, Ubi says
is just the working title.
Rescue! works better.



MEGA MAN
POWERED UP /
MEGA MAN
MAVERICK HUNTER X
MEGA REMAKES

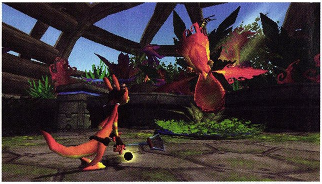
Pub. Capcom **Dev.** Capcom **Release** Spring

Seemingly, you can't do a lot with a franchise as old as *Mega Man* outside of the standard remake treatment, but somehow, Capcom has found a way to make not only the original *Mega Man* interesting again, but the original *Mega Man X* game as well. Both games feature completely revamped graphics, sound, and all the other bells and whistles you'd expect to find in an updated classic. Naturally, they also include new features, so it's certainly worth your while to check them out if you're a fan of the series.

In the case of *Mega Man Powered Up*, based on the original *Mega Man*, there's a level editor that lets you build your own levels from scratch using the game's included tools. There's also a challenge mode where you can complete up to 100 minimissions. With *Mega Man Maverick Hunter X*, based on *Mega Man X*, you can now play the game from the perspective of one of the Maverick robots (basically, one of the bad guys) to get a whole different perspective on the *Mega Man* universe.

HAIKU:

Little Blue Bomber
Getting remade like crazy
Just for your pocket.



DAXTER
A PSP'S DREAM

Pub. Sony CEA **Dev.** Ready at Dawn **Release** Spring

Remember when Jak was locked up for a couple of years before the start of *Jak II*? Well, if you were wondering what Daxter was up to, ponder no more, since this game fills you in. Besides looking for Jak, Daxter becomes a pest exterminator. This cover job gives him free reign to zip around Haven City and look for clues about where Jak is being held.

Besides platforming gameplay, *Daxter* sports another neat feature: PSP-to-PS2 interoperability. Plugging in a *Daxter*-equipped PSP to your PS2 unlocks secret vehicles in *Jak X*, while *Jak X* returns the favor by unlocking secret levels within *Daxter*.

HAIKU:

Decent platforming
Plus PS2 connection
Is pretty darn sweet.

BOUNTY HOUNDS
DIABLO IN THE STARS

Pub. Namco **Dev.** Namco **Release** April

OK, let's say you want some fast action-RPG fun, but you're a little weary of the whole swords, sorcery, and magic fantasy malarkey. *Bounty Hounds*, which involves crazy space aliens and mercenaries brandishing nasty guns, might hit the mark. Technically, it's more like a third-person action game with light RPG elements, but those elements focus on what matters most: character stats and "phat loot" (aka over 500 weapons and pieces of armor). What's also pretty snazzy is that you can dual-wield these weapons, so you can use a couple of rifles to snuff out baddies from afar and then switch to knives for cutting up fools that get too close.

HAIKU:

A knife in one hand
An Uzi in the other
Makes for fast action.

FIELD COMMANDER

THE ART OF WAR

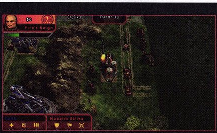
Pub. Sony Online Entertainment **Dev.** Sony Online Entertainment **Release** March

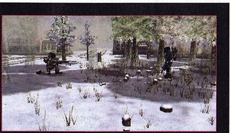
World War II movies are filled with crusty old commanders directing less-crusty young guys around the battlefield like chess pieces, and that's kind of what you feel like as you load up *Field Commander* (minus the impressive bristling mustache, of course). The tutorial level walks strategy-game newbies through the basic maneuvers needed to conduct a successful campaign.

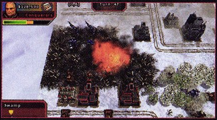
There are multiple gameplay options—play through the campaign, get in a quick battle, take on another player head-to-head (in true old-school coolness, there is a hotswap mode where players pass one PSP back-and-forth between turns), or else spend your time creating your own missions. You can start from scratch or modify a mission map, and when you're done, you can upload the missions to a central site for others to play on.

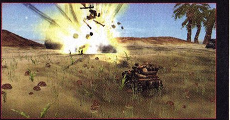
HAIKU:

Like *Advance Wars* but
no DS? Stop your crying—
now you don't need one.


Turn: 11
Napalm Strike




$128,500
Turn: 47
Conquerors
Swamp



GENERATION OF CHAOS

FFT MONOPOLY!

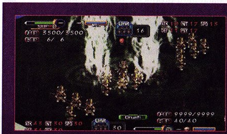
Pub. Nippon Ichi **Dev.** Idea Factory **Release** February

We keep saying this a lot, and the people we hope are listening haven't acted yet: When is a known RPG like *Final Fantasy* or *Suikoden* hitting the PSP? We have a few action-RPGs on the platform, but no comfortable, old-school RPGs to speak of. While there is still nothing huge, we can take comfort in knowing that the strategy-RPG fans at Nippon Ichi are putting out a strat-RPG for the PSP.

Basically, you choose one of 10 kingdoms and manage your empire. Build up your cities and then send an army out to conquer other territories. Each kingdom has specific attributes; some are economy experts, while others have mighty armies. After building up castles and outposts, you then work on recruiting commanders to lead massive (30 units versus another 30) turn-based battles against everyone else.

HAIKU:

Manage time and land
And go fight some other peeps
In rockin' combat.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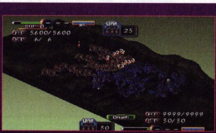
Crush
30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Crush
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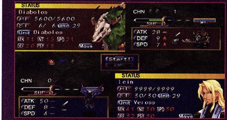
STATUS
Diabolos
5600/5600
Diabolos
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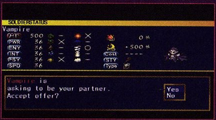
Start!
STATUS
Lein
9999/9999
Veross
Move


SOLDIERSTATUS
Vampire
Yes
No

Vampire is
asking to be your partner.
Accept offer?

UNTOLD LEGENDS 2:
THE WARRIOR'S CODE

DUNGEON LORDS

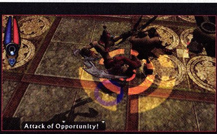
Pub. Sony Online **Dev.** Sony Online **Release** March

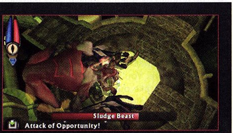
The first *Untold Legends* was one of the best-selling titles at the PSP's launch, but it took some critical hits for long load times and bland graphics. We can report, however, that load times (which went on so long the screen sometimes went dark) are shorter this time around, and characters and environments are showing a much higher level of detail.

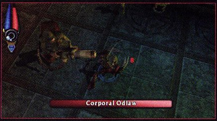
One of the best additions to the game is a new special ability feature. Killing enemies will slowly fill your special ability gauge, and once it's full, you can shape-shift into a different—and more powerful—form, allowing über-kickassness to take place. And we like being über-kickass. All that's left is for the team to create a story that steps beyond generic RPG territory.

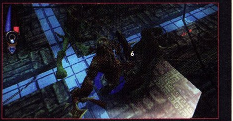
HAIKU:

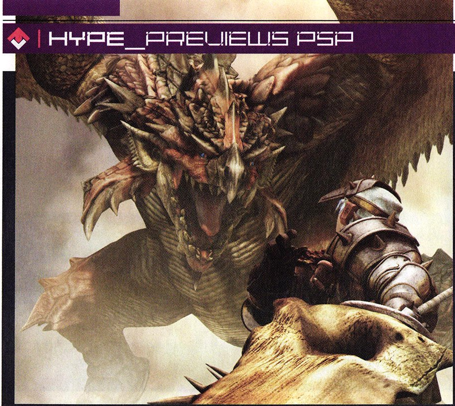
Shorter loading times
Are a blessing. Now for game-
play variety.


Attack of Opportunity!


Sludge Beast
Attack of Opportunity!


Corporal Odlaw





MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM

IRON CHEF WITH CATS

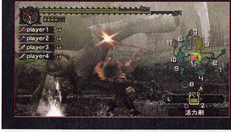
Pub. Capcom **Dev.** Capcom **Release** Spring

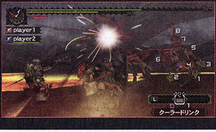
While *Monster Hunter* may not have been an enormous hit on the PS2—due to the PS2's less-than-spectacular online push—we're still hoping it finds success on the PSP. Alas, it's only going to use ad hoc multiplayer, which means that other players have to be in the vicinity. Fans of the PS2 version will also be happy with the revamped hub, where weapons, armor, and all sorts of other items can be stored. Plus, you'll notice that the amount of armor and weapons has been increased.

But perhaps the most notable new feature is the Felyne Kitchen. Yes, much as it sounds, it's a kitchen filled with cats, but not just any ordinary cats—they're those mischievous *Monster Hunter* cats. Basically, they can prepare a variety of foods for you to try—each item produced in the kitchen will have a different effect on your character during a quest. In addition, the cats' cooking skills will improve as you use them more, and each cat adds a "special ingredient" to the mix. No, we don't want to know what that special ingredient is.

HAIKU:

No infrastructure
Makes us a bunch of sad cats
But cat kitchen rocks!





PURSUIT FORCE

LEAPING LAW ENFORCEMENT

Pub. Sony CEA **Dev.** Bigbig Studios **Release** March

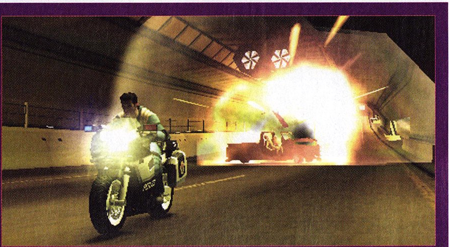
The heroes of the *GTA* games are all pansies—they can only steal a car when it's stopped! *Pursuit Force's* hero kicks things up a notch by leaping majestically between moving vehicles hurtling down the streets, highways, rivers, and storm drains of Capital City at up to 150 mph.

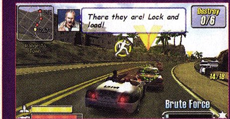
Pursuit Force puts you in the role of a member of its titular police squad, which is charged with taking down the five gangs that have made Capital City a decidedly unsavory place to live. You'll generally start out in a police vehicle, but in order to take out these tough gangsters you'll need to pull your vehicle alongside them and leap into their cars.

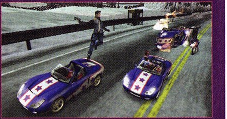
The game mixes things up to an almost ridiculous degree, interspersing driving (of cars, trucks, and even boats) with shooting (from cars, helicopters—even on foot) at a lightning-fast pace that approaches even *Burnout* in terms of sheer speed. In our recent hands-on session, switching between driving, shooting, and leaping proved surprisingly intuitive. The on-foot segments (which we did not see) could prove to be a weak link, but if the rest of the game is any indication, we're not too worried.

HAIKU:

Blue-winged bird in flight,
A steel rain drenching his foes.
(Watch out for that bridge.)







FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

PUNCHING OUT

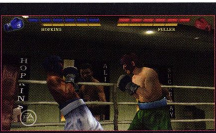
Pub. EA Games **Dev.** EAC **Release** March

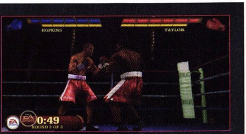
Once again, concern about the PSP's lack of a second analog stick rears its head with the impending release of the next *Fight Night* title, but similar to what we've seen with *Me & My Katamari* (see page 59), the *Fight Night* developers have figured out a pretty workable solution for moving a two-analog-stick-centric control scheme over to the PSP.

For the punches, which in previous games have been mapped to the right analog stick, the team has adopted a *Tekken*-esque approach, where each face button is mapped to a specific arm move: Triangle for a left straight punch and Square for a right straight punch, and X and Circle for left and right hooks, respectively. While it's not perfect, it's a suitable adaptation that shows the developers at least put some thought into going to the PSP.

HAIKU:

One analog nub
Plus triggers and face buttons
Works fine for boxing.


HOPKINS
FULLER


HOPKINS
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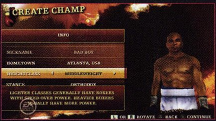
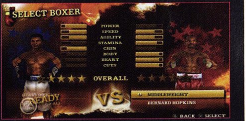
0:49
ROUND 3 OF 3

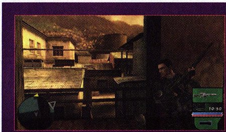

CREATE CHAMP
INFO

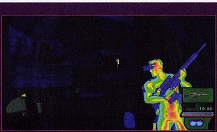
NICKNAME BAD BOY
HOMETOWN ATLANTA, USA
WEIGHTCLASS MIDDLEWEIGHT
STANCE ORTHODOX

LIGHTER CLASSES GENERALLY HAVE BOXERS WITH SPEED OVER POWER. HEAVIER BOXERS USUALLY HAVE MORE POWER.

L OR R ROTATE △ BACK ✕ CONTINUE


SELECT BOXER
POWER
SPEED
AGILITY
STAMINA
CHIN
BODY
HEART
CUTS
OVERALL
VS
MIDDLEWEIGHT
BERNARD HOPKINS
△ BACK ✕ SELECT





SYPHON FILTER: DARK MIRROR

FIFTH TIME'S THE CHARM?

Pub. Sony CEA **Dev.** Sony CEA **Release** March

It's hard to whip up much enthusiasm about a *Syphon Filter* game since the PS2's underwhelming *Omega Strain*. But the prospect of getting in some day-after-tomorrow espionage action on the go, we must admit, does have us intrigued.

Sony is promising smarter enemies, more techno gear with which to take them out, and a more realistic look...but what really has us interested is the eight-person multiplayer (ad hoc and infrastructure). The game sports four game types and appears to be taking a cue from *Splinter Cell* with the addition of gadgets designed especially to mess with human competitors, such as claymores and sound decoys. Best of all, the highest-ranked player online gets to play as Gabe Logan, with a special assortment of weapons and gadgets.

We're just hoping the single-player game stacks up.

HAIKU:

Bright ball of red flame,
Screams and smells of barbecue:
Taser held too long.

STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 MAX

TAG TEAM, BACK AGAIN

Pub. Capcom **Dev.** Capcom **Release** February

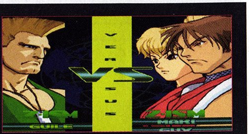
If you didn't have the chance to check out the excellent *Street Fighter Alpha 3 Upper* for the GBA (arguably the best portable fighter and an amazing technical achievement), then you absolutely have to check out *Alpha 3 Max* for the PSP. Capcom has added plenty of new features, the most notable of which is a tag team mode called Variable Battle mode. Much as in the *Vs.* series of Capcom fighting games, this mode lets you tag in and out of a battle with two characters. If your health is getting low, tag out and the new character will take your place.

The three newest *Street Fighter* characters—Yun, Maki, and Eagle—will also be included in *Alpha 3 Max*. But more importantly, there's ad hoc multiplayer, where players can fight each other in a round-robin tournament.

HAIKU:

Dude, *Street Fighter 3*
But now with more cool punches
And tag team battles.

SELECT PLAYER SEL
STREET FI


VS
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MAX
MAX

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SURVIVAL MODE
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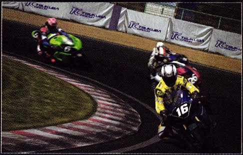
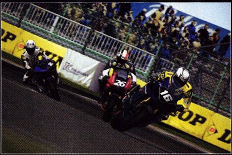
∞
XX
01'24"98

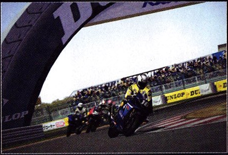
TOURIST TROPHY

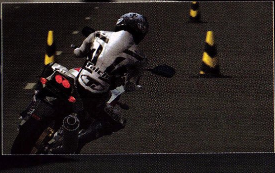
Pub. Sony CEA **Dev.** Polyphony Digital **Release** Spring

While Kazunori Yamauchi is busy running Polyphony Digital and thinking a lot about *Vision GT*, his trusty right-hand man Takamasa Shichisawa is pouring his passion for motorcycles into *Tourist Trophy*. Of course, we can talk about the 80-plus bikes made by 12 manufacturers or how many of the courses are from *GT4* (as is the core game engine) but modified to be motorcycle appropriate. But instead, we'll just show you how Polyphony Digital still does a damn good job of making a nigh photo-realistic racing sim on the PS2.









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REVIEWS

MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, ONE GAME AT A TIME

68

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE TWO THRONES

TWO PRINCES ENTER...

OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE

GAME OF THE MONTH

RATING KEY

No more blargs, octagons, or whatever you've called them—now we're sticking with straight-up numbers. And any game that receives five of 'em is something truly special that deserves a spot in your collection. On the other hand, a 2.5 is merely mediocre. And a 0.5? Well...at least they're fun to rip apart.

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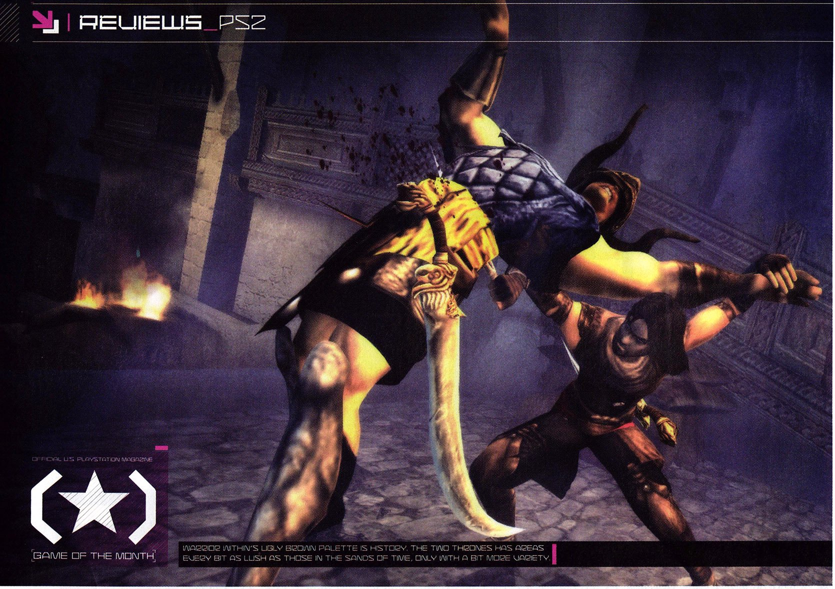


OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE

[GAME OF THE MONTH]

WARRIOR WITHIN'S UGLY BROWN PALETTE IS HISTORY. THE TWO THRONES HAS AREAS EVERY BIT AS LUSH AS THOSE IN THE SANDS OF TIME, ONLY WITH A BIT MORE VARIETY.

PUB. Ubisoft DEV. Ubisoft ESRB M MSRP $49.99

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE TWO THRONES

A DREAM COME TRUE

Sequelitis isn't as much of a problem in the videogame industry as it is in Hollywood. Sure, there are occasional missteps, but advances in technology and programming techniques tend to make newer games better than their predecessors. Perhaps that's why when a game comes out that's noticeably worse than its forebears, it's such a disappointment. *Jak II* is one example. *Suikoden III* is another. And *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* is a *big* one.

It was especially disappointing for me because I just absolutely adored *The Sands of Time*. It's one of my favorite games ever, in fact, and that made it a doubly difficult act to follow. So when *Warrior Within* showed up on the scene with its adolescent death-metal attitude, paper-thin character development, and monotonous gameplay, it turned me right off. I would still talk up *The Sands of Time*, but when it came to *Warrior Within*, I'd just tell people, "Don't bother."

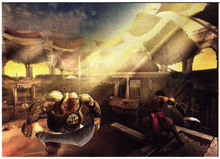
I won't be saying that again. Because as disappointing as the game might be, you absolutely need to play it to get the most out of *The Two Thrones*. As hard as it may be for fans of the original to believe, the mind-numbing, time-switching slogging and repetitive battles of *Warrior Within* are absolutely, 100 percent redeemed by *The Two Thrones*.

I cannot recall ever seeing such a stunning example of a developer so competently and thoroughly addressing criticisms about a game. The key here, I think, is balance: There's a perfect mix of combat and platforming, of light and dark, of humor and gravity. Moments of measured story development are balanced by moments of ass-kicking frenzy. New scenes and characters are balanced by familiar faces and settings. And the Prince's "edgy" (read: annoying) machismo that permeated *Warrior Within* is balanced by a wry self-doubt similar to what we saw in *The Sands of Time*—and a new, welcome maturity (in the true sense of the word).

> THE DARK PRINCE SEGMENTS SET UP A REALLY SPECTACULAR PAYOFF.

And then there's the balance inherent in the Prince's new dual nature. *The Two Thrones* takes the idea of the alternate-character "Mask of the Wraith" subplot of *Warrior Within* and weaves it into the entire game. Every so often, the Dark Prince takes over the Prince's body, equipping him with new acrobatics and devastating new attacks—and even when he's not in control he frequently comments on the Prince's environment in an interesting sort of internal dialogue. Switching up your weapons and abilities is an innovative way to break up gameplay, and it lends itself to some fascinating story elements—which, of course, I can't possibly spoil for you. Suffice it to say that the Dark Prince segments work well (even if they do occasionally feel a bit too scripted) and set up a really spectacular payoff at the end.

As an aside, let me say that *The Two Thrones'* ending is one of the most provocative and satisfying in all of gaming—as long as you've



SIZE ISN'T EVERYTHING

I know some folks complain that *The Sands of Time* is too short—and as far as I'm concerned, *Warrior Within* is probably too long (by the way, isn't it funny how seeing the "dark" thing done right makes that game look even worse?). *The Two Thrones* gets the balance just right, clocking in at a solid 15 hours.

played the previous two games. (If you haven't completed *The Sands of Time*, for example, the very last scene will be utterly lost on you. But if you have, you'll want to stand up and cheer. At least, I did.) The final boss is challenging but perfectly balanced, and the denouement is just beautifully executed.

But for my money, the most welcome shift in balance comes in the area of combat versus platforming. *The Sands of Time* is arguably a bit too light on combat, while *Warrior Within* is definitely too heavy on the battles—to the point of utter monotony. *The Two Thrones* gets the balance just right, mixing up long, satisfying run-jump-swing-climb segments with brief, but powerful, battles. Even more impressive is the addition of the "speed stealth" mechanic; while at first it sounded like little more than a marketing catchphrase, this system (now dubbed "speed kills") actually works really well and helps customize the game to your preference.

I'll explain: By moving carefully and remaining undetected, you'll get the opportunity to take out enemies via a timing-based minigame in which you have to tap the Attack button at key moments. Get it right and you're treated to an impressive, cinematic kill (sometimes clearing out multiple enemies). Miss the timing and the enemy will block your attack, requiring you to revert to more-straightforward combat. If you get really good at seeking out and exploiting opportunities for the stealth kills, you'll have minimal hand-to-hand combat to contend with—but if you'd prefer to master the sword-fighting combos instead, you can ignore the stealth kills entirely. The only problem with this system is that occasionally an unfortunate camera angle can cause you to miss the visual cue (a glow on the Prince's dagger) that tells you when to hit the Attack button. Aside from that, it's a solid, elegant system that's incorporated well throughout the game (especially when thrown in for variety in the boss battles).

Honestly, other than the fact that you really do have to play the disappointing *Warrior Within* to get the whole story, there's almost nothing to complain about here. *The Two Thrones* is an eminently satisfying game in its own right, and a more than worthy sequel—already it's going head-to-head with *God of War* in game-of-the-year debates around the office. Regardless, to my mind it's the best *Prince of Persia* yet. If you play just this one, you'll think it's excellent. But if you've played the last two, you'll think it's a masterpiece. | *Joe Rybicki*

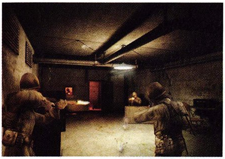
VERDICT Tops even *The Sands of Time* for pure satisfaction. You'll need to play the last two games to get the most out of it, though.

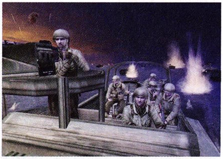
SCORE 5|5

TIME AFTER TIME

If *The Two Thrones* has any area for improvement, it's in the use of the Prince's time powers. Though the rewind and time-slowing abilities are useful and important, the advanced tactics are still fairly unhelpful and unnecessary, and no new abilities are introduced.

DON'T EXPECT ENEMIES OR TEAMMATES TO DO ANY KIND OF THINKING. THEY PRETTY MUCH JUST RUN THROUGH THEIR SCRIPTED ROUTINES.





PUB. Activision DEV. Treyarch ESRB T MSRP $49.99

CALL OF DUTY 2: BIG RED ONE

DUTY, CAN YOU HOLD? I'VE GOT HONOR ON THE OTHER LINE

By now you know the "WWII FPS OMG!" drill. A cinematic roller coaster full of shouting and guns and explosions! A whirlwind tour through the biggest war in history! A touching tale of brotherhood in the trenches! All wrapped up in a pretty videogame package.

And there really is a sense of scale and drama in *Big Red One*—you definitely get the idea that World War II was not exactly a pleasant thing to be caught in the middle of. Planes crash, buildings crumble, friends die. The earth shakes and the skies crack asunder. It's all very big and scary and intense.

But then you get far enough in the game that you're forced to replay small sections of levels repeatedly, and the fear and intensity are replaced by an awkward awareness of how this big, cinematic experience comes with some incredibly stringent scripting.

And trudging through levels that are so exhaustively, painfully scripted just begins to feel like a tour of duty in itself after a while. Seeing an open half-track driving by, full of German soldiers packed in like fascist sardines, seems like a delicious opportunity... until you discover that you can't really shoot any of those bastards until the track arrives at its preset destination and the soldiers all disembark and get set up to come at you. That's the kind of thing that can really pull you out of the experience.

That's unfortunate, because *Big Red One* provides one of the most intense and varied experiences in the genre. You're not just driving tanks and manning turrets here; you've got tanks and turrets and antiaircraft guns and demolitions and even a really neat stint in the belly of a bomber, manning both the bomb sights and several different guns.

Trouble is, the game is obviously pushing the PS2 pretty hard—so graphical glitching and slowdown abound, and animation of just about everything is almost always painfully jerky. So while there's always an awful lot going on onscreen...none of it looks particularly good.

All in all, this is about what we've come to expect from a competent World War II FPS: frequent moments of drama and tension and cinema interspersed with some fairly run-of-the-mill shooting. | *Joe Rybicki*

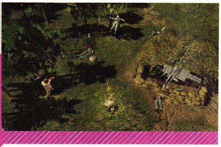
DUTY Unusual variety for a WWII FPS, very cinematic

DOODIE Too-tight scripting makes the game feel unpleasantly restrictive

SCORE 3.5 | 5

CRITICAL ACCLAIM

Gamers often mocked Acclaim's output by nicknaming the company "Akklame." While its library wasn't the strongest one around, we can say that *Combat Elite* was a much better game at Acclaim than it is right now.



COMBAT ELITE: WWII PARATROOPERS

GAME OF INFAMY

PUB. SouthPeak Interactive DEV. BattleBorne
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

OK kids, this is one of the perils of game reviewing: to make these reviews timely, we often get games before they come out. We review them in good faith, and you read us in good faith. Snappy-doody so far—except when, in the time period between us sending the review to the printer and the printer sending out our magazine, the publisher, oh, I dunno, declares bankruptcy and the game doesn't come out.

So, yeah, despite me reviewing *Combat Elite* back in Issue #83, the game didn't come out until this year with the help of publisher SouthPeak Interactive. We were *this* close to running the same review, as we assumed that the intervening year was spent more on contracts and publishing and whatnot, and less on changing the game.

Except...what was a good-hearted but ultimately mediocre attempt at putting the gameplay of a *Diablo* or *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* in the setting of the Second World War (where neat things like improving soldiers' skills clashed with the problems of emphasizing ranged combat in a genre preoccupied with melee combat) actually became worse.

How? Because now it has the most idiotic aiming scheme in any WWII game.

Perhaps in an effort to correct the often-cited problem of "you shot guys offscreen with the lock-on," the developers have opted to make it so you always aim toward the top of the screen. Meaning, if a Nazi is on your left side and you face left and lock on, you'll aim your gun toward the top of the screen and completely ignore the guy next to you. And the guy behind you. No, rather than snap onto those guys, you have to move the camera so that they're between you and the top of the screen and THEN lock on. So combat becomes an exercise in camera positioning rather than, uh, normal skill.

Who knows, maybe *Combat Elite* stopped being "*Diablo* with Nazis" and decided to be a game where you literally make the world revolve around you to shoot guys. In that case, bravo! But unless you're looking for some sort of bizarre narcissism RPG, just skip this. | *Thierry Nguyen*

LOOK FAMILIAR?

If you're wondering why the *Call of Duty* series bears so many resemblances to the *Medal of Honor* series, it's because the original *Call of Duty* was designed by a bunch of ex-members of the *Medal of Honor* team.

VERDICT No matter how decent the rest of the game is, the aiming scheme kills it.

SCORE 1.5 | 5

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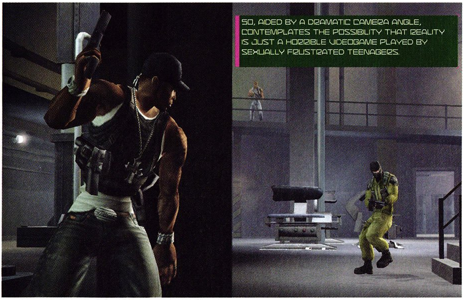
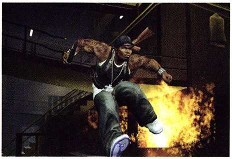
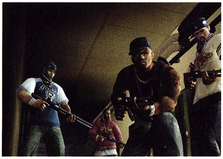


50, AIDED BY A DRAMATIC CAMERA ANGLE, CONTEMPLATES THE POSSIBILITY THAT REALITY IS JUST A HORRIBLE VIDEOGAME PLAYED BY SEXUALLY FRUSTRATED TEENAGERS.





PUB. VU Games DEV. Genuine ESRB M MSRP $49.99

50 CENT: BULLETPROOF

DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB, 50

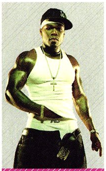
In an age when celebrities brand themselves like shoe companies and stamp their names on products spanning the vast megamall of modern media, videogames have become a choice promotional vehicle. Early attempts at game crossovers were rough (think *Britney's Dance Beat*, or worse, *Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch: Make My Video*). But 50 Cent's assault on gamers, *Bulletproof*, shows a growing sophistication in the celebrity-game genre, at least on the surface.

Bulletproof is a third-person shooter in the style of *Dead to Rights* or *Max Payne*, though what you'll notice first are the game's impressive cut-scenes. 50 and longtime collaborators Eminem and Dr. Dre turn in stellar voice-acting performances, and the visual direction of the scenes is inspired, veering into strange hallucinations and making use of trippy music-video effects.

But all hell breaks loose when you take control. The gun battles that account for 99 percent of the game are extremely flawed. *Bulletproof*'s aiming controls—no matter which configuration or sensitivity settings you choose—are as sloppy as they come. It is virtually impossible to hit a moving target with any regularity, a problem compounded by the behavior of your targets. Enemies have a tendency to run, constantly and erratically, like tweakers on a four-day crystal meth binge. And they seem to have psychic powers, able to detect your presence from across the room, fleeing as your target crosshairs find their faces and landing every impossibly distant potshot from across the room. It's horribly frustrating. Add to that levels riddled with dead-end hallways, confusing repeated scenery, and puzzles that are always either stupidly obvious or completely unintuitive. I mean, whose idea was it to have 50 run around activating fright elevators in the projects? Even more out of place are the game's "counter kills," an assortment of grizzly death scenes 50 can inflict on foes when you tire of fighting the shooting controls. I can dig ultraviolence in the right context (say, *Manhunt*), but *Bulletproof* is just courting controversy with porn-cam head shots and jugular slashes. Mr. Cent, please don't kill me, but your game is the opposite of fun. | *Robert Ashley*

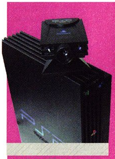
VERDICT *Bulletproof* gets the nonessentials right—the cut-scenes, unlockable promo videos, and music—but everything else is crap.

SCORE 1.5|5



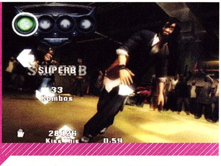
GIMME THE LOOT

Bulletproof is the only game in the world with a "steal" button, which is used for stripping jewelry, money clips, and wallets from your victims. What's that cash for? Why, purchasing 50 Cent's latest hot tracks and music videos, of course!



VANITY MODE

Do you look totally awesome playing dance games but lack the ability to look at yourself while playing them? Well, *Flow* has a fix: Just plug in your EyeToy camera and *Flow* will use the grainy, humiliating video for a backdrop. If only there were a record option.



FLOW: URBAN DANCE UPRISING

SAME OLD STEPS, NEW OLD MUSIC

PUB. Ubisoft DEV. A2M ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Are the serious *Dance Dance Revolution* freaks still going at it? Are you still getting complaints from your downstairs neighbors for perfecting your double-mat technique at three in the morning? Are you still on the all nachos and *DDR* diet? Are you still driving around town visiting every broken-down arcade, hoping to show off your routines to a new crowd?

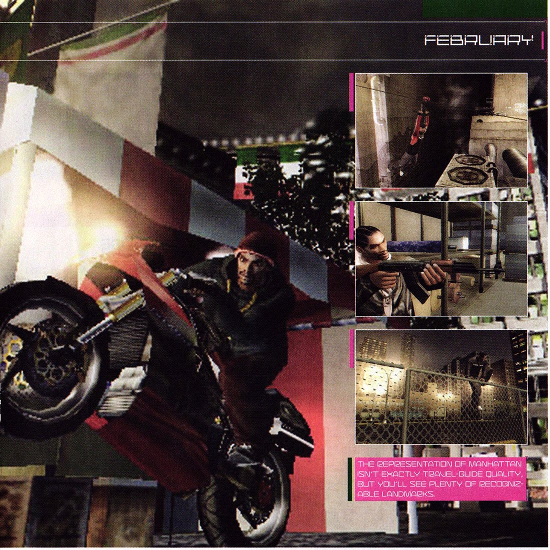
Maybe it's time for something a little different, as in only slightly different. *Flow: Urban Dance Uprising* is the latest *DDR* clone vying for the attention of dancers. The mechanics of the game are what we're all used to. As directional arrows in the game pass by, you tap the corresponding arrow button on the dance mat. The various arrow patterns onscreen lead you to create dance moves offscreen or—depending on your level of coordination—look like a complete and total jackass.

The main difference—and it's actually quite minor—between *Flow* and the competition is the game's emphasis on break-dance moves and hip-hop tracks. How does the game make you break-dance? Well, it doesn't. If you're one of those crazy people who memorizes every move in a song and then adds your own "real" dance moves to the mix, then I guess you could try to throw a headspin or backflip in while you play. Otherwise, *Flow* features the usual hokey-pokey with animated break-dancers doing their thing in the background.

The only thing that really sets *Flow* apart is its music. While *DDR* occasionally throws a hip-hop-flavored track in with the J-pop, *Flow* is 100 percent Brooklyn block party, circa 1981. You've got your Sugarhill Gang, your Kurtis Blow, your Eric B. & Rakim (OK, so it's not all 1981), and a host of retro-minded modern artists. The game is the same old steps, but the music, for once, made me want to dance. | *Robert Ashley*

VERDICT *Flow* is close enough to *DDR* to warrant a patent infringement lawsuit, but its playlist of all hip-hop tunes makes it a decent alternative to *DDR*'s modern disco tracks.

SCORE 3|5



THE REPRESENTATION OF MANHATTAN ISN'T EXACTLY TRAVEL-GUIDE QUALITY, BUT YOU'LL SEE PLENTY OF RECOGNIZABLE LANDMARKS.

PUB. Activision **DEV.** Luxoflux **ESRB** M **MSRP** $49.99

TRUE CRIME: NEW YORK CITY

THE TRUE CRIME IS A LACK OF POLISH

The original *True Crime* was a respectable stab at the free-roaming action genre pretty much created by *Grand Theft Auto*, despite its bizarre, *Big Trouble in Little China* story twist (though who doesn't love flaming demon skulls mixed in with their police drama?) and occasional glitch. And now we have *True Crime: New York City*, which takes the same formula, adds a bunch of new features, and goes all urban culture on your ass. Again, the game is a respectable stab at the genre *GTA* built, but one so rife with bugs that it's really hard to appreciate what it offers.

There's a lot to like here, really. You've got the entire island of Manhattan in which to do what you please. Go joyriding, be all goody-goody and lower the crime rate, shake down civilians and plant evidence, enter any number of buildings for vicious fisticuffs or shoot-outs—the list goes on. And it's all pulled together by a decent story and mostly solid controls.

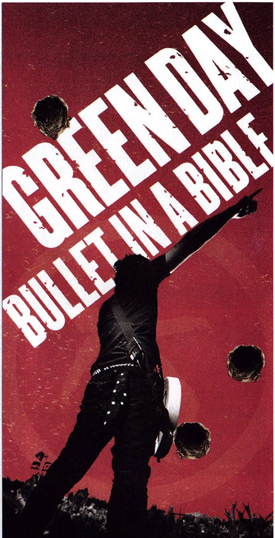
Unfortunately, the list of bugs is just as extensive. *True Crime* suffers from a jittery framerate, horrible vehicle physics that results in bizarre things like motorcycles ramming semis off the road, a targeting system that makes the one in *GTA* feel intuitive, bad collision detection, and—worst of all—complete lockups. On a couple of occasions, the game froze, forcing me to reset the system.

True Crime has that horrible rushed-to-market feel you tend to get with a lot of holiday releases. The underlying game is solid and would have been great had Activision taken the time to iron out the myriad bugs and glitches. Unfortunately, a lack of quality control busts this game down from a must-buy to a rental in the first degree. | *Greg Sewart*

FRIENDLY RIVALRY
The *True Crime* and *Grand Theft Auto* games take a lot of shots at one another. Listen closely to main character Marcus when someone asks him to drive a cab.

VERDICT Endless technical glitches and bugs kill the otherwise solid play mechanics.

SCORE 2.5 | 5



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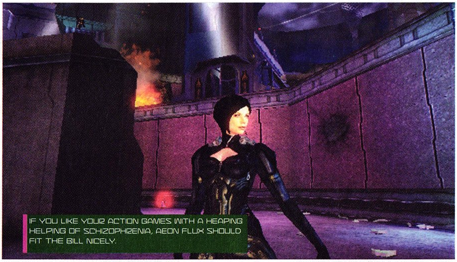
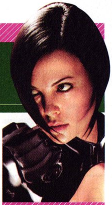


IF YOU LIKE YOUR ACTION GAMES WITH A HEAPING HELPING OF SCHIZOPHRENIA, AEON FLUX SHOULD FIT THE BILL NICELY.



PUB. Majesco **DEV.** Terminal Reality **ESRB** T **MSRP** $49.99

AEON FLUX

A BALL FULL OF CHARLIZE

A hyperstylish animated series that's filled with slick action, sexual outuendo, and the death of the main character in every episode sounds like a pretty unique foundation for a game. It's too bad, then, that the *Aeon Flux* game finds itself caught between two sources of inspiration: the original animated series and the current Charlize Theron movie. And it's not just the setting that's caught between two identities—the game design itself wavers between two game types.

At first glance, *AF* resembles a more stylish *BloodRayne* (which is probably due to the fact that it uses the same engine). It has lots of third-person melee combat, and said combat is chock-full of basic combos and acrobatic attacks that fill up your "style gauge," which in turn helps you pull off powerful combos, making combat look more like a night at the ballet rather than a traditional videogame brawl. Besides the combat, there's some suitably acrobatic platforming that isn't difficult to actually pull off but sure looks cool.

When Aeon isn't twirling around above some dude's head while snapping his neck, or rappelling down future-blimps, or jumping from yellow glowy pole to yellow glowy pole, she curls herself into a giant metal ball and rolls around the level. Yes, you read that right: At times, *AF* stops being futuristic *BloodRayne* starring Charlize Theron and becomes *Metroid Prime* starring Charlize Theron. These sequences just feel out of place and totally break up the solid pacing of the action/platforming/basic puzzles. In addition to becoming a giant metal ball, Aeon also remotely controls a tiny ball that she can sneak into certain areas for puzzle-solving purposes.

Along with the game's schizophrenic feel (thanks to the whole "ball and not-ball" gameplay), the use of the *AF* license is a mishmash, as said above. Each mission stands completely alone, and you'll occasionally find Aeon in totally contradictory positions as she progresses from one to the next (such as killing Trevor Goodchild in one mission, and being his wife in another), and in that respect, *AF* resembles the animated series. Except it has the look of the movie. So fans of the movie will be confused by the lack of a central story, while fans of the series will be irked by the lack of Möbius-influenced art. In the end, though, *Aeon Flux* is a surprisingly solid movie-licensed title—despite its somewhat odd use of a balled-up Charlize Theron. | *Thierry Nguyen*

PROS Solid action, decent graphics and platforming

CONS Inconsistent feel in regard to the license, the whole curling-up-into-a-ball thing

SCORE 3|5

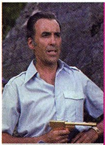
THERON LICENSES WE'D LIKE

The Italian Job
Rerelease it as a Charlize Theron driving game!

Mighty Joe Young
Think *King Kong*, but replace Naomi Watts with Charlize!

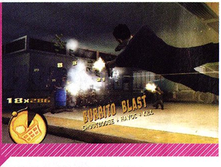
2 Days in the Valley
The girl fight between Charlize and Teri Hatcher done *Dead or Alive* style!

Arrested Development
Help Mr. F find new hats!



ODD REFERENCE

In a game replete with goofy Latino hip-hop and Mexican culture jokes, why the heck is one of the power-ups—the Golden Gun—named after a movie starring an old Scottish guy fighting an old English guy?



TOTAL OVERDOSE

MEX PAYNE

PUB. Eidos **DEV.** Deadline Games **ESRB** M **MSRP** $39.99

Just as the cuisine of that fine south-of-the-border country Mexico combined itself with the cuisine of the southwestern U.S. to form the culinary classification Tex-Mex, so have the developers at Deadline conspired to jam Mexico, hip-hop excess, *GTA* freedom, *Prince of Persia* time mechanics, and *Max Payne* gameplay into the stew that is *Total Overdose*. The result is pretty much the digital equivalent of Taco Bell—wholly artificial, yet somewhat comforting in its mediocrity.

The overly convoluted story begins with a DEA agent's death, followed by his son's subsequent investigation and the undercover work of the son's twin brother. By the time you get past the more-complicated-than-it-should-be introduction, you're put into a third-person gunplay game with a little bit of vehicular free roaming, a dash of side missions to break up the central story, and an attempt at a whole lot of sizzle. Ramiro Cruz is gifted with a move that slows down time when he is in midleap with guns blazing, a propensity for doing weird cartwheel flips off of walls and head shots in midflip, the ability to collect rewind power-ups, and the tendency to yell out groan-inducing names for combo moves (like "Burrito Blast!" or "Gringo Frenzy!"). While the moves and power-ups are somewhat original, the core gameplay remains merely serviceable. As mentioned earlier, when you're not performing core story missions, you can get extra power-ups and abilities (such as dual wielding) by doing side missions like blowing up burrito carts, shooting people dressed like death in some bizarre Day of the Dead celebration, or racing cars around town.

Despite the solid action, several flaws prevent the game from being anything more than goofy fun. The NPCs have a tendency to leap into the air for no apparent reason, the car physics feel off, and the cool moves are too much work for little gain (why do a crazy backflip head shot when a simple shotgun blast to the gut does the same work?). Just like a fine chalupa meal at Taco Bell, you're getting exactly what you paid for, no more, no less. | *Thierry Nguyen*

VERDICT As much cheese and fulfillment as a gordita combo meal.

SCORE 3|5

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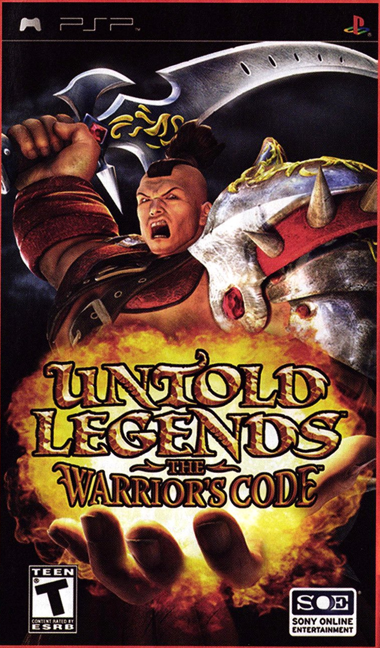
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WILD ARMS 4'S SIDE-SCROLLING PARTS MARK ONE OF THE FEW AREAS WHERE THE GAME STRAYS FROM YAWNING RPG CLICHÉS.

Helter Skelter
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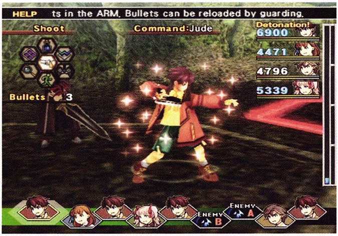
ENEMY A



PUB. Xseed DEV. Media Vision ESRB T MSRP $39.99

WILD ARMS 4

TIME FOR THIS TIRED FRANCHISE TO GROW UP OR DIE

The *Wild Arms* series has always been the appendix in the body of the modern RPG genre. The dull, clichéd series served a purpose at one time, in the brief window of the PlayStation's life span when nothing else existed to serve RPG fans. Games like *Suikoden* and *Final Fantasy VII* made it irrelevant, yet it's quietly, uselessly survived ever since. Now, with *Wild Arms 4*, the appendix ruptures.

Just about every tired Japanese RPG standby you can imagine shows up here, trotted out one more time by developers who can't think of anything better. The shadowy council, the hero's destroyed village, the evil empire—these and other familiar bits and pieces are ripped off from better-loved anime and games. Into this bland stew, developer Media Vision has tossed an original ingredient: an insipid, nonsensical theme, restated by 80 percent of the game's dialogue, that insists that childhood is the only time of purity and adults are malevolent, alien creatures incapable of doing good even if they try. (Not that many of them do.)

Just as bad is the tortured battle system, which indicates that Media Vision recognized the need to innovate but didn't have a clue how to begin. The hex grid scheme mainly makes every battle slow, with many turns wasted getting your party into range of the enemy—it certainly doesn't make the action any more difficult or interesting, since there are at least two game-breaking strategies available to the player early on.

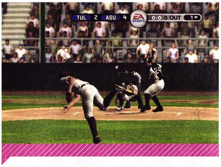
Only boss battles, which usually throw in a new wrinkle to overcome, pose any challenge. The elite Brionac forces are generally the highlight of *Wild Arms 4* since they supply the only interesting or clever parts of the story. Even so, these parts are few and far between, making up only about an hour's worth of decent content in a 30-hour game.

Having long since outlived its usefulness, the *Wild Arms* series has gone, with this entry, from merely banal to actively irritating. With such a wealth of RPGs getting translated nowadays and more companies than ever eager to get into the act, it's about time this appendix was removed. | *Nich Maragos*

Though *WA4* doesn't really put Xseed's best foot forward, it marks the debut of a new publisher, made up of former Square Enix USA employees. Future titles, such as *Shadow Hearts 3*, promise better things, so RPG fans should keep an eye on it.

SEE ALSO *Xenosaga, FX, LOTR: The Third Age*, and any other RPG on PS2.

SCORE 1.5 | 5



MVP 06 NCAA BASEBALL

CAN MVP LITTLE LEAGUE BE FAR BEHIND?

PUB. EA Sports DEV. EA Canada ESRB E MSRP $29.99

So it's come to this: *MVP 06*, losing the MLB license, finds itself on the road to...Omaha. Wha—? OK, in all fairness, Omaha is home to the NCAA College World Series—certainly the ultimate goal for many an aspiring professional ballplayer—but after *MVP 2005*, which was last season's best baseball sim *and* features all the players in the MLBPA, it's a noticeable drop-off (though college diehards are likely thrilled with the prospect of playing with metal bats and 128 teams).

In order to keep hardball fans appeased, EA Canada has added new features to an already great baseball engine. The biggest is the intuitive analog swing system, which has you pulling back on the right analog stick and then flicking it forward to swing, producing satisfying results. The fielding tweaks don't fare as well. Using the right analog stick to throw to corresponding bases isn't nearly as smooth as simply pressing a designated button. Expect double plays to be down, while fielding miscues and frustrations will be up. (It should be noted that you can revert to previous years' systems should you so desire.) Fortunately, the series' hallmark pitching meter returns, keeping the chucking game as fun as always.

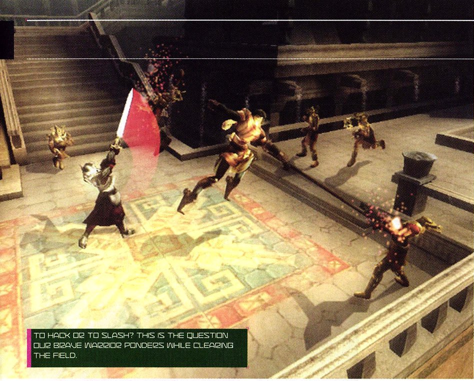
The dynasty mode proves interesting—in addition to achieving team goals, you'll need to recruit athletes to replace outgoing seniors. Another time sink: the addictive hitting and pitching minigames, although it's disappointing that they're virtually identical to last year's (how about a fielding one?), and the incentive for playing them is sapped by a lack of unlockables (the equipment you open up in the dynasty mode is nothing to get excited about).

In all, *MVP 06 NCAA* delivers a great baseball sim, though it might take a bit more work for you to enjoy it—in terms of getting used to no-name players and potentially adjusting gameplay options to your liking. But hey, no one said life in Omaha would be easy. | *Greg Ford*

CONTACT A successful new swing system, entertaining dynasty mode and minigames

WHIFFS The lack of the MLB license, fielding problems

SCORE 4 | 5



TO HACK OR TO SLASH? THIS IS THE QUESTION OUR BRAVE WARRIOR PONDERS WHILE CLEARING THE FIELD.

PUB. Midway **DEV.** Midway **ESRB** T **MSRP** $49.99

GAUNTLET: SEVEN SORROWS

THIS WARRIOR NEEDS FOOD

It doesn't always pay to be a genre-defining game. You don't, for example, see people passing up *Burnout* sessions to play *Night Driver* or *Pole Position*. *Street Fighter* sits on the back burner these days while the latest and greatest, *Soul Calibur III*, handles practically all PlayStation 2–mediated conflicts. Likewise, *Gauntlet*, the original evil-horde-clearing hack-n-slasher, has been surpassed by young upstarts like *Dynasty Warriors* and *Spartan: Total Warrior*. What's a classic franchise to do? Commit to the huge effort of an all-out reinvention and beat the upstarts at their own game? Um...no.

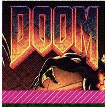
Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows goes the easier route of visually updating the series' time-tested formula, and maybe that's for the best. There's just something cool about the way soldiers, ogres, and fantasy freaks of all kinds stream out of the game's patented "generators," those strange creature-spawning structures that, with much satisfaction, can be taken out with a few swipes of an ax. Unlike its modern competitors, *Gauntlet* steadfastly resists realism. Enemies simply writhe in pain when they're struck, which might seem a little cheap but keeps the action fast and thoughtless, just how I like my *Gauntlet*.

Seven Sorrows' real hook should have been the RPG-style leveling-up options. As you make your way through the game's various locales, you raid treasure chests for loot and earn points to put toward advancing your ass-kicking abilities. But while you can buy new attacks and beefier stats, *Sorrows*' short length prevents the upgrades from mattering very much. You would expect a game this simple to go on for a good 10 to 15 hours to back up its Tolkien-ripped scenarios with an actual epic. But even dawdling players will finish *Sorrows* in less than six hours.

You'd also expect that a six-hour-long game named after its bosses (the "Seven Sorrows") would bring its "A" game to boss battles, but they all feel like the same generic hackfest. The best way to play this new *Gauntlet* is at a game night with a few friends and some drinks. It's a bite-size nugget of nostalgia and mindless fun. | *Robert Ashley*

PROS Prettied-up classic *Gauntlet*, great for a multiplayer romp
CONS Much shorter than you might expect, lacking climactic boss battles

SCORE 3|5



DOOMED

Seven Sorrows marks the return of game design legend John Romero (*Doom*, *Quake*) to the world of big-screen games after a stint of turning out cell phone titles. Gamers everywhere are relieved.

OUTSOURCED

Games in the *Shining Force* series are usually developed externally from Sega, and *Neo* is no exception: This time, the developer is Neverland, whose past titles include the *Lufia* games on the Super NES and *CIMA: The Enemy* for the Game Boy Advance.

SHINING FORCE NEO

A NEO DIRECTION FOR THE SHINING FORCE SERIES

PUB. Sega **DEV.** Neverland
ESRB T **MSRP** $49.99

A lot of games available now are more fun to watch than they are to play, but *Shining Force Neo* manages to pull off the opposite effect. If you were just looking at it, you'd probably see the "My First Convention" anime character designs, hear the overly chipper voice acting, laugh out loud at the silly plot, and assume you weren't missing anything.

Inside, though, is a pretty accomplished dungeon crawler with a special emphasis on the quality of the loot you get—and since amassing better loot is the primary objective in a game like this, that's no small concern.

Also, like in the best dungeon crawlers, new equipment is visible when you put it on, which helps to sell your character as a badass when he's got some of the better weapons in the game.

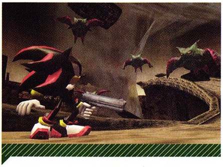
The key to a game like this is to make combat feel really good, which is something *Shining Force Neo* does a lot better than those middling *Champions of Norrath* games. When you swing your sword, it feels like it has impact, even if you're only hitting a barrel.

The interface is a little weird, giving you the ability to quickly switch between items but not weapons, which would have been helpful since sometimes you need specific types of weapons to proceed. The system never quite becomes second nature, but once you get used to it, you won't mind so much. At the very least, you can switch to a different control scheme if the default one bothers you.

Shining Force Neo may not be a strategy-RPG like the other games bearing the *Shining Force* name, but if you don't hold that against it, you'll be rewarded with a well-executed action-RPG. | *Nich Maragos*

SHINING Solid action-RPG with addictive gameplay
FORCED Lame story, ugly character art

SCORE 3.5|5



SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

THE HEDGEHOG JUMPS THE SHARK

| PUB. Sega DEV. Sonic Team ESRB E10+ MSRP $49.99

Ever since *Sonic Adventure* hit the Dreamcast in 1999, the *Sonic* series has been in a tailspin, finally crashing with 2003's mediocre *Sonic Heroes*...or so we all thought.

Enter *Shadow the Hedgehog*, the newest, edgiest entry in the *Sonic* universe, featuring a gun-wielding rodent amnesiac. Here, the title character races through a handful of pretty standard *Sonic*-esque levels, hopping on things, dashing through other things, and generally doing everything as quickly as possible.

Except now, he's packin'. And while it's debatable whether the idea behind Shadow carrying a gun is a good one, there's no denying that the execution of said idea is completely broken, taking an already sloppy game to the point of no return.

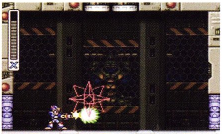
See, the idea in most levels is that you have a choice to be good or evil, based on which group you attack—humans or aliens. The problem is that your guns lack a lock-on feature, and the game doesn't differentiate between friend and foe, making the entire experience one of the most frustrating around.

Not that choosing sides matters much, since the enemies on the ground all attack you no matter which side you happen to be fighting for. It's hilarious to hear the croaky voice of the alien eye telling you not to harm their forces as four of them attempt to fry you for no other reason than you happen to be in range.

And that's *Shadow* in a nutshell. A couple of good ideas, a couple of bad ideas, but all executed so poorly that the game almost feels unfinished. Combine that with a control and camera system that's been getting progressively worse for the past six years or so, and it's official: The hedgehog has jumped the shark. | *Greg Sewart*

VERDICT The questionable inclusion of a hedgehog with a gun is so poorly executed that it's actually better to avoid picking up a weapon.

SCORE 1.5 | 5



MEGA MAN X COLLECTION

TOO MUCH MEGA

| PUB. Capcom DEV. Capcom ESRB E MSRP $29.99

Mega Man is a robot—er, man of many talents. So many talents, in fact, that he has appeared in dozens of games and in an offshoot series known as *Mega Man X*, in which that rascal Dr. Wily has been replaced by the evil and much more sinister Sigma. Robots that were once allies of Mega Man are now his foes. Anyway, no one really plays the *Mega Man X* games for their stories, despite what the incredibly long-winded and stupendously boring chatter scenes may suggest, so we'll just get down to it—these are all *Mega Man* games. You still fight several robots. You still gain their powers and use them against other robots. You still beat the several robots and then go on to face the head honcho.

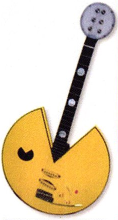
There's just not much to it. Of course, all of these games are fun action games if you're hankering for a little of the classic platforming and shooting action that only a *Mega Man* game can deliver, and the soundtrack—generated by that oh-so-amazing Super Nintendo sound chip—for many of these games is still really top-notch (with the exception of that atrocious J-pop rock theme in *Mega Man X6*'s intro—though the cut-scenes are still kind of cool).

So, ultimately, you have to be a huge *Mega Man* nut if you want to get these games—especially since many of them are newer than the games released in the original *Mega Man* collection, meaning that all-important element of nostalgia just isn't quite there. And unfortunately, *Mega Man Battle & Chase*, essentially a *Mega Man* car-combat game, just doesn't do enough to make the package that enticing, whether you're a hardcore fan or not. Let's just be thankful there hasn't been a *Mega Man Legends* collection. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

PROS Cool music, old-school *Mega Man* action

CONS Some games are still kind of new, which lessens the nostalgia factor; all *Mega Man* games are pretty darn similar

SCORE 2.5 | 5

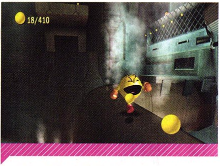


GEEK CHIC

In 1998, a guitarist by the name of Dave "Timely" Winer had the good sense to commission a custom-built Pac-Man guitar with a blinking headstock in the shape of a power pellet and a body carved into the traditional Pac-Man pie; the guitar, sadly, never got Dave laid.

HISTORY LESSON

Shadow the Hedgehog made his debut as Sonic's rival in 2001's *Sonic Adventure 2.*



PAC-MAN WORLD 3

FEVER NOW MORE OF A CHILL

| PUB. Namco DEV. Blitz Games
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

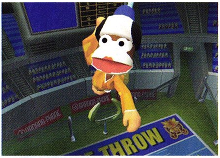
I know it's uncool to say you prefer the ancient beeping and blinking games of the 1980s to the vivid virtual worlds and Hollywood productions of today, but in one specific way I do: Back then games didn't tell you much about themselves. You knew your character's name, maybe, and not much else. Everything was ambiguous. Pac-Man was a little, yellow...what? He ate ghosts for no apparent reason. Hell, he ate everything but the maze walls. Pac-Man didn't need a backstory. He didn't need a goal. He didn't need to speak. Less is more, and the lack of detail created an air of mystery.

Fast-forward to present day: Pac-Man is pie-eye deep into a stint of easygoing, perfectly acceptable, thoroughly uninteresting games by the name of *Pac-Man World*. In this, the third game in the series, I find myself wishing for the old, ambiguous yellow dot. Pac-Man now has a voice actor. He has a family. The ghosts are his friends. Worse, his new adversary is some mad scientist (um...Erwin). Yes, they've dropped Pac-Man into a *Crash Bandicoot*/*Mario*/*Sonic* platformer, the king of videogames reduced to covering other games' greatest hits.

He mostly pulls it off, running, rolling, bouncing, and punching through surprisingly dark locales. He solves simple puzzles, manages some casual platforming, and dabbles in various forms of unsatisfying combat. I dug the little throwbacks to the Pac-Man of old, the bouts of ghost gobbling and maze running, though persistent visual glitches scuff up the presentation. *Pac-Man World 3* shows up to class every day but settles for straight C's. It will mostly appeal to youngsters, and I'm sure that kids will find something in it. But the folks who grew up with Pac-Man won't find much to love in this lazy cash in. | *Robert Ashley*

VERDICT Pac-Man plays minor-league Mario for the two people left in the world who still can't get enough key puzzles and Easter egg hunts.

SCORE 3 | 5



PUB. Sony CEA DEV. Sony CEI ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

APE ESCAPE 3

MONKEY GEAR SOLID

The *Ape Escape* franchise hasn't been having the best run lately. *Pumped & Primed* fizzled, *On the Loose* was underwhelming, and *Academy* sucks (see page 84). Thank goodness for *Ape Escape 3*, which ditches the whole minigame tangent and gets back to business: the monkey-capturing business.

This time around, the lunatic primates have taken over the airwaves and perverted a variety of TV shows with their monkey madness. So rather than spending all your time kicking around a jungle, you'll jump into a variety of different scenarios: a hot spring, the Old West, a ninja-infested temple, and many more.

You'll quickly find yourself outfitted with a variety of different gadgets that will help you round up enough apes to clear the level. In addition to the trusty monkey net, there's radar, a slingshot, and even a radio-controlled car for long-distance beatdowns. Your ape-snagging preteen heroes will also learn how to transform into new outfits that grant powerful new attacks and abilities. As the gunslinger you can fire a volley of bullets nonstop; as the ninja you can scale walls and tiptoe across ropes. Since the monkeys aren't afraid to attack you this time around, that extra firepower becomes necessary.

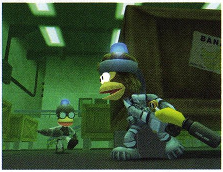
The dual-analog interface is intuitive, the level designs are clever, and the gameplay works, mostly. The boss fights against giant monkeys aren't exactly head-scratchers (just beat on them until they fall apart), and controlling the variety of vehicles (cars, rowboats, giant robots) can be a headache.

But *Ape Escape 3*'s presentation is what really hurts the whole package. The graphics are mediocre, especially for a first-party game late in the PS2's life cycle. The voice acting is painfully stilted. And the translation is woeful—a game that relies so much on humorous monkey scenes deserves a more polished English rewrite.

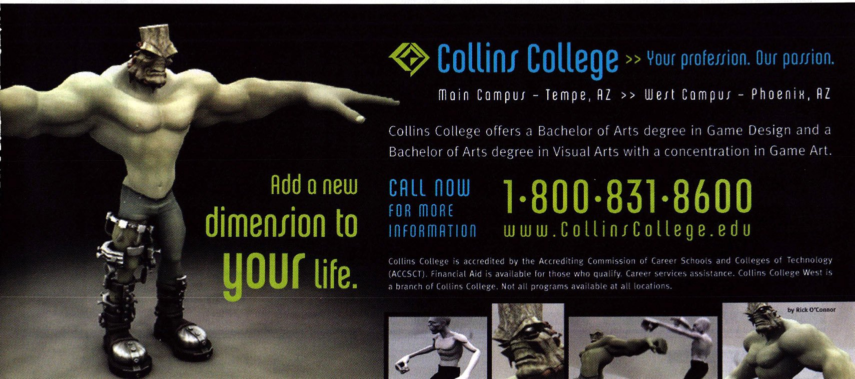
Kids might get addicted to *Ape Escape 3*, but grown-ups will find it to be more of a brief, if pleasant, diversion. | *Chris Kohler*

MONKEY DO Different outfits keep things varied; collecting monkeys is addictive
MONKEY DON'T Visuals and voices are strictly amateur-hour; the translation sucks

SCORE 3|5



The *Metal Gear Solid*–themed minigame in *Ape Escape 3* (which you have to beat the game to unlock) is the other half of the crossover that began in last year's *MGS3*, which features a rather challenging mode in which Solid Snake chases down the *Ape Escape* monkeys.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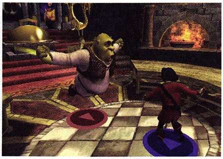
by Rick O'Connor



SHREK SUPERSLAM

NOT SO SUPER

PUB. Activision DEV. Shaba Games

ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

In case you couldn't figure it out from the title, this is a melee fighter in the same vein as *Super Smash Bros.* As one of 20 characters from the *Shrek* universe, you beat up on any of the other 19 characters from the *Shrek* universe.

The fighting itself is simplistic, and button-mashing will serve you just fine, but there are a few combos to ferret out and master. Sadly, the movies' smart humor is missing, and most of the dialogue is immature at best.

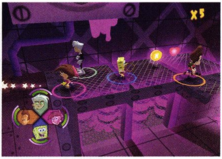
The story mode is pretty lackluster—it's simply a short string of unrelated fights with a little bit of trash-talking at the start. The better single-player mode is Mega Challenge, which has you working to beat a series of specific challenges. You can also set up melee fights with up to four characters (either fighting in pairs or every man/cat/donkey for himself), and there's a training room that teaches basic techniques.

The meat of a game like this, however, is multiplayer. While there are only two modes available (melee and king of the hill), it's just a lot more entertaining to play against someone real so you can trash-talk—after all, isn't that the whole point of a fighting game? Multiplayer holds up decently enough, but unfortunately, the size (and often busy design) of the levels means it can get tough to keep an eye on your character throughout the fight.

Shrek SuperSlam probably won't hold the attention of one child very long, but if you've got multiple game-playing kids in the house, it might be worth your investment, if only because that way the kids can contain their standard sibling fisticuffs to virtual arenas rather than acting it out for real. | *Dana Jongewaard*

VERDICT Don't play this alone—or if you're older than 12.

SCORE 2.5 | 5



NICKTOONS: UNITE!

THE POWER OF FOUR

PUB. THQ DEV. Blue Tongue

ESRB E MSRP $39.99

Young kids tend to really, *really* love the shows they like, which is why companies would be really stupid not to license out the properties of children's shows. Nickelodeon decided to do that concept one better by putting the main characters from four of its biggest cartoons (*SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The Fairly OddParents*, *Jimmy Neutron*, and *Danny Phantom*) all in a single game.

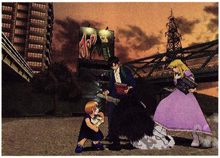
SpongeBob, Jimmy, Timmy, and Danny have joined forces to stop the Evil Syndicate (which is composed of the main villains from each of the four shows). Multiplayer is available for up to four players, who can jump in and out at any point in the game, or you can switch off among the characters as a solo player with the press of a button. It's a simple game—so simple that it's really not good for anyone over the age of 9 or 10—but it's not bad, and the way it's structured makes it perfect for parents to jump in and out to help when kids get stuck. The overall graphics are good, and the game's sections are split evenly among the worlds of the four TV shows.

Some sloppy things do pop up, however. The camera is mostly decent, but there are some awkward angles. Controls can be imprecise, and occasionally the dialogue is just written and not spoken, which could be problematic for nonreaders. And the enemies and overall section structure are pretty repetitious.

Repetitiousness, however, probably won't matter to the kid who is asking you to make the same goofy face or read the same story over and over…and over. While *Nicktoons: Unite!* doesn't hit the sweet spot of being equally fun for all ages to play (like *We Love Katamari*), it's very suitable for the Nickelodeon set. | *Dana Jongewaard*

VERDICT Good for young kids, particularly fans of the show.

SCORE 3 | 5



ZATCH BELL! MAMODO BATTLES

MORE CREEPY, BIG-HEADED KIDS FIGHTING EACH OTHER

PUB. Bandai DEV. 8ing

ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Bandai has turned the anime-based fighting game into a cottage industry, as it's released similar titles for just about every hot animated series that's made its way from the Land of the Rising Sun to our shores. And while *Zatch Bell!* has more than a little in common with the Bandai games that came before, it still manages to stand out thanks to striking graphics and oddball characters.

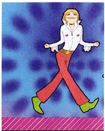
Mamodos have come to this world in order to do battle (natch) and decide who will be the next king. These odd little characters have one weakness, though: They need to team up with a human in order to use their special powers. Thus, you've got this team-based fighting game that mixes standard fisticuffs with off-the-wall special attacks and magic.

If you take into account that *Zatch Bell!* is really a kids' game, then it delivers big time. Pulling off spectacular moves is almost too easy, as every character's arsenal comprises simple single-button attacks. Even the superspecial, normally match-ending attacks are unleashed with a single press of the L1 button.

Zatch Bell! does fall into the same trap as many anime-based fighting games before it: a real lack of substance. Because the game is so easy to play, each and every match feels pretty much the same despite the wildly different-looking opponents and arenas. With such a shallow arsenal of attacks to draw on, each match generally deteriorates into pressing X until your super meter is charged enough to unleash your special attack. Even most children will find that boring after an hour or so. Or at least, I'd hope so. | *Greg Sewart*

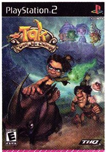
VERDICT Yet another pretty—but shallow—anime-based fighting game from Bandai that offers some good fun for about an hour.

SCORE 2.5 | 5



VITAL LINK

Head to www.zatch-bell.com to play *Boing! Boing! Folgore*, a *Dance Dance Revolution* clone featuring the bizarre Italian performer from the show, where you can watch him tweak his creepy little heart-shaped nipple covers.



SNEAKY MARKETERS

Inserting a memory card with saved games from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Tak: The Great Juju Challenge*, or *Barnyard* (all published by THQ) unlocks various items (such as alternate outfits, concept art, and cheats) in *Nicktoons: Unite.*

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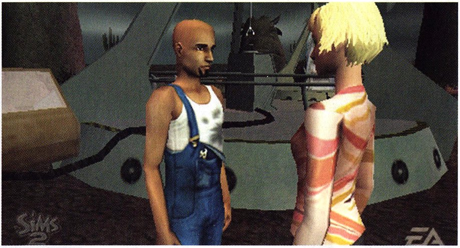
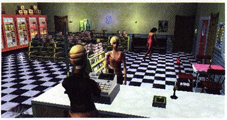




| **PUB.** EA Games **DEV.** EA Games **ESRB** T **MSRP** $49.99 v

THE SIMS 2

SIMPLE, SWEET, AND SLOOOOOW

There are only so many times you can tell someone to go pee and have it be entertaining. And that's potentially the biggest strength of *The Sims 2* on PSP—the baby-sitting of human functions has been minimalized. No longer are you sending Bob Newbie to go shower/eat/work/etc. every two minutes.

Instead, you're fulfilling a constant stream of minigoals. These myriad checklists provide a speedy treadmill upon which to progress in the game. Whether it's fulfilling a want or checking off an objective, there are always many options for your Sim to be pursuing. One of my frustrations with *The Sims* on consoles has always been a chicken-and-egg type of situation—my Sim is depressed because she hasn't fulfilled certain goals, but she's too depressed to fulfill these goals. Now all of that frustration is gone. There is always some unemotional want that I can complete to perk up my overall mood, whether it be picking up trash or selling something to a merchant.

What also helps speed things up are the minigames that are involved in both conversations and skill-building activities. While incredibly simplistic, doing the *Track & Field* Circle mash helps pass physical fitness time so much faster than just watching your Sim struggle with a barbell.

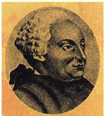
Sadly, however, the game clips along much more slowly than it should, thanks to some excruciating load times. In the beginning of the game it is merely annoying, but as you progress and your save file grows, a single basic conversational exchange (in which your Sim is given one choice for response) can take up to 30 seconds for your PSP to process. It's painful, painful, painful.

Also a potential frustration for avid *Sims* players is the serious downgrade of replayability. While previous games have sandbox modes, letting you conduct your own perverse experiments in human nature, the PSP version has its lone story mode to play through, with the same results each time.

In terms of gameplay, the game surpasses its console counterpart, but the technical snags drag it back down. | *Dana Jongeward*

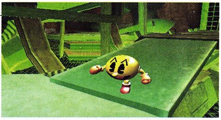
THUMBS UP Content
THUMBS DOWN Technical performance

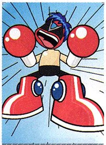
SCORE **3.5** | 5



FREE WILL

One of the hallmarks of the *Sims* series, the ability to let your Sim do his own thing, is not present in the PSP version of the game. Hard determinists like Baron d'Holbach, who believed that people were incapable of free will and that what was destined to happen would happen, would approve.





PAC SPEAKS

Pac-Man World 3 is the first *Pac-Man* game in which the little yellow guy actually gets a voice. It reminds us a lot of the Homestar Runner character Stinkoman, which fans of the site know is not a compliment. (Ahem: www.homestarrunner.com/sbemail57.html.)

PAC-MAN WORLD 3

A WORLD OF HURT

| **PUB.** Namco **DEV.** Blitz Games
ESRB E **MSRP** $39.99

At this point in the PSP's life, one thing should be abundantly clear: You can't just port a console game to PSP and expect it to work. Only nobody told Namco, because here's *Pac-Man World 3*. Although this version retains most of the qualities that make its console counterpart an adequate 3D platformer, all the little problems of its big brother get magnified on the small screen.

At first, everything looks fine. You're Pac-Man. You can run and eat, jump on platforms, punch out monsters, and chow down on power pellets, all in glorious 3D. You can even call on former enemies Pinky and Clyde to help you through puzzles.

But issues soon start to make themselves known. The camera is drunk. It spins wildly, making you fall off cliffs a lot. The analog control is floaty, also making you fall off cliffs a lot. It's difficult to discern depth cues, which also...you get the idea. Jumping on a series of platforms that is easily navigable on PS2 becomes hell on PSP.

If you see a little *Galaxian* ship, you can touch it to play a top-down maze game modeled on the original *Pac-Man*. How they managed to screw this up I don't know, but the odd viewpoint and unresponsive controls make these minigames the most unbelievably frustrating version of *Pac-Man* ever.

And most aspects of *Pac-Man World 3* don't seem optimized for PSP. Appropriately enough, there's quite a bit of ghosting, turning the screen into a mess of bleeding colors. The cinemas are grainy, and the subtitles are nigh unreadable. And I'm stumped as to why I have to save the game *twice* after each level.

Pac-Man is a legend in his own time. He deserves better. | *Chris Kohler*

VERDICT 3D platformers need to be designed for portables from the ground up or not at all. *Pac-Man World 3* was not designed for portables from the ground up.

SCORE **2.5** | 5

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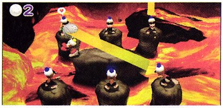


APE ESCAPE ACADEMY

MORE LIKE SPECIAL ED

PUB. SCEA DEV. SCEI
ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

Hey, it's sort of like *WarioWare*, but on the PSP! With monkeys! Play a bunch of random minigames to mark off places on a tic-tac-toe board, then "graduate" when you complete enough rows! How charming! What could go wrong? Apparently *everything*.

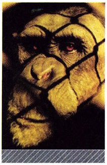
Perhaps the biggest problem with *Ape Escape Academy* is the fact that you *literally* spend more time waiting than you do playing. Unskippable interstitial screens featuring your primate professors and about 10 seconds of loading before *and* after every game mean that you should find something to do while you wait. When you finally start playing, you'll find that every minigame bites. Poor controls mean you'll struggle with the simplest tasks: defending an air-hockey goal, shooting a gallery of apes, juggling balls, boxing, playing soccer. The games are always more frustrating and stupid than fun, and often shorter than the load times.

Even worse is when *Academy* shows you a random Asian nation's flag—Cambodia's, say—then asks you to identify it. Do you know what Cambodia's flag looks like? No? You lose. Or my favorite: a seemingly endless series of multiplication problems. Seriously. I graduated fifth grade, thanks. At least the multiplication tables are somewhat self-explanatory. Most of the games aren't, and the instructions given during the exceptionally lengthy loading screens are no help.

All this adds up to the fact that you won't be graduating from *Ape Escape Academy* anytime soon, because you are almost guaranteed to lose every game the first few times you play it. Oh, and if you're racking up failures and want to restart the level? You'll have to manually reset the system. Whether or not you will instead fling your PSP against the wall like so much monkey poo is anyone's guess. | *Chris Kohler*

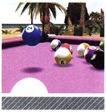
VERDICT *Ape Escape Academy* is a lesson in bad gaming.

SCORE 1 5



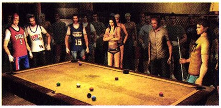
GREAT APES

Head to www.ape-o-naut.org/famous/ for a list of history's most famous monkeys. Gordo, the first monkey in space! Nim Chimpsky, the first ape to learn American Sign Language! Bubbles, Michael Jackson's "friend!" Undignified? Sure, but it beats starring in *Ape Escape Academy*.



GENE POOL

There haven't really been any truly exceptional pool games for home consoles, but *Pool Paradise* on PS2 is a very solid effort. It's loaded with lots of weird minigames and extras, but the underlying game is quite solid.



THE HUSTLE: DETROIT STREETS

YOU CAN, IN FACT, KNOCK IT

PUB. Activision DEV. Blade Interactive
ESRB T MSRP $29.99

The Hustle is easily one of the worst games I've played in a long time. "But wait!" you say. "How is it possible to screw up a pool game?" And once you strip away the clunky presentation, awkward controls, silly career mode, ugly graphics, and insanely long load times...wait, no, it's still crap.

About the only thing this game has going for it is a wide variety of pool games, 10 in all, including perennial U.S. favorite snooker. (Well, that and the fact that the game keeps your battery-life icon up in the corner at all times.) Trouble is, actually *playing* these games is just short of physically painful. Turn off the awful nü-rock soundtrack (though inexplicably the game continues to load the songs) and the player animations (though observer animations are still active) and the game becomes generally playable...but that's not exactly high praise.

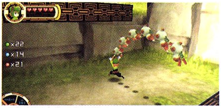
Also perplexing is the choice of voiceovers. Observers interject with some of the most random observations I've ever heard in a game. You'll hear explosions of "Crap!" and "This is bulls***!" and "Are you holding the right end of the stick?" at times that appear to bear no relationship to the action on the table. My favorite, though, is this oft-repeated gem: "Hey, new boy! You wearin' mittens?" Er, *what*? But hey, at least you can turn that off too!

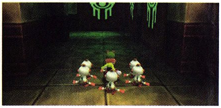
An intimidation system makes things seem interesting until you realize it has almost no bearing on anything else in the game; it simply speeds up the target for your shot meter—but it's never enough of a change to bother paying attention to.

Bottom line: If you ignore (or turn off) everything except the most fundamental game of pool, the game's not *awful*. That's the best thing I can say about it. | *Joe Rybicki*

VERDICT I'd rather play the Java-based pool game on Yahoo.

SCORE 1 5





TOKOBOT

WHAT CAN'T THEY DO?

PUB. Tecmo DEV. Tecmo
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

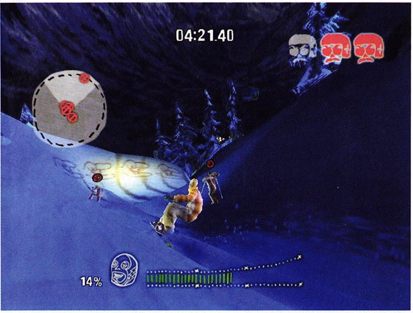
The initial attraction to *Tokobot* isn't unlike that to Nintendo's *Pikmin*—having diminutive, almost mindless characters do most of your dirty work just has its own innate charm. In reality, that's the only substantial similarity between *Tokobot* and *Pikmin*, because whereas *Pikmin* is more of a real-time strategy game, *Tokobot* is more of a straight-up action-platformer—though not quite as intense as most platformers.

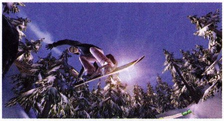
The idea is that you use these small robots to help you throughout the levels. In the early portions of the game, the Tokobots' abilities are fairly limited—you can only do a few attacks and a couple of acrobatic moves with them. These initial move sets take some getting used to simply because you have to not only switch the Tokobots into different formations in order to use them properly but also be concerned with timing and how many Tokobots you have. Combat can be particularly problematic since it takes a second or so to swing the Tokobots around like a massive baseball bat. Don't get the wrong idea, though. It's never totally unmanageable, and you should have no problem coming to grips with the mechanics within a short period of time, but it wouldn't have hurt if the Tokobots were a little quicker or just a bit more responsive.

The level design also involves pretty standard (and maybe too simplistic) platforming action, so if you're looking for something as action packed as, say, *Jak* or *Ratchet*, then you're definitely barking up the wrong tree. But if you're looking for a somewhat new angle on the old platforming formula with a little taste of *Pikmin* thrown in, then *Tokobot* is worth checking out. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

PROS Nice twist on familiar genre, vibrant graphics
CONS Tokobots are initially awkward, level design a little boring at times

SCORE 3.5 5





PUB. EA Sports Big **DEV.** EA Canada **ESRB** E **MSRP** $49.99

SSX ON TOUR

HAMSTRUNG BY COURSE DESIGN

EA's breakout snowboarder has grown and developed nicely over the past few years, but as far as faithfully capturing the feel of hyper-unrealistic winter sports on the portable level, things are still a little tricky for *SSX*.

Like its console cousins, *On Tour* for PSP introduces exactly two new features to the *SSX* family: a hip façade featuring study-hall notebook doodling and skiers, the snowboarder's archnemesis. But at its heart, *On Tour* is the same old *SSX*.

Which would be totally fine, as long as course design were up to the standards set by *Tricky* and *SSX 3*. Sadly, it isn't. The available tracks lack variety, are uninspired, and sometimes even seem as though they're designed to work against players rather than encourage them to "be one with the mountain." Illogical and poorly placed ramps, obstacles, and turns play havoc with *On Tour*'s suggested trick lines (e.g., a grind rail that leads you directly into a large and unfortunately placed rock). It's not that *SSX* courses all need to contain the spastic excess we saw in *Tricky*; *SSX 3*'s mountain still inspired a Zen-like feeling without resorting to a snowpocalypse design. *On Tour*'s mountain simply lacks soul.

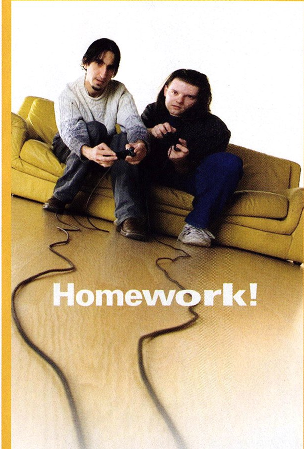
But that isn't the PSP's fault, and EA did a mostly marvelous job making *On Tour* feel natural on the new hardware. Were it not for one critical button placement, it would feel like playing *SSX* on the PS2. But if you're an *SSX* vet who's used to blasting the turbo as soon as you land a major trick, having Square pull double duty as the boost and grab can really mess with your timing. Complicating matters further is a camera that likes to occasionally get too far over your head, so as you swoop through ravines and high-banked turns, you'll have no idea what direction you're headed.

It's too bad, because *On Tour* is a good first effort, and a lot of the pieces are in place. The loading times are quite tolerable, the game looks very good, and a few hiccups aside, the framerate is rock solid. The only things that prevent it from feeling like a true *SSX* game are minor control issues and major course design flaws. But as with anyone who starts out snowboarding, the learning process can be tough—there are high hopes for next season's snow. | *Andrew Pfister*

VERDICT The game is technically sound, but inferior track design keeps this one from the greatness of its predecessors.

SCORE 3 5

2,090,000
The number of results returned in a Google search for "SSX." Most interesting unrelated results: Surayaba Stock Exchange, Space Ship Experimental, and Swarthmore Spheromak Experiment.



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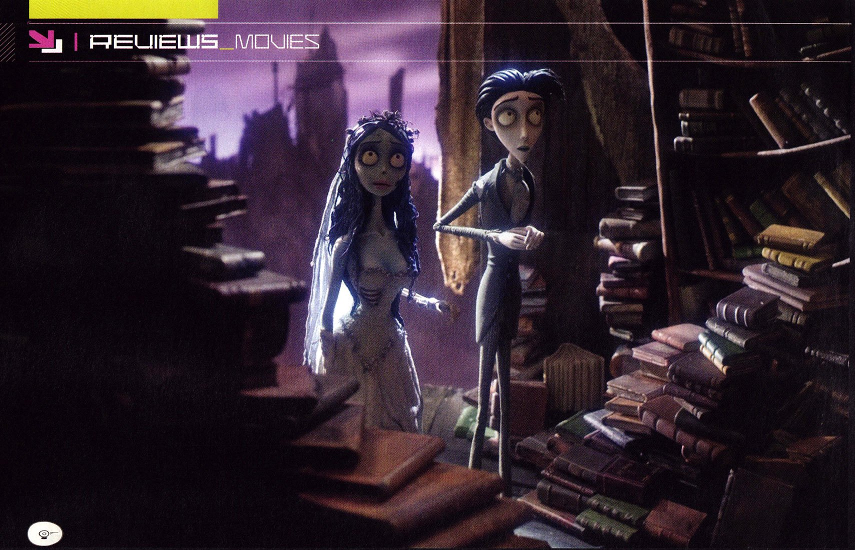


[Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter]

TIM BURTON'S CORPSE BRIDE

COLD FEET INDEED

by john scalzi

For the legions of goths and postpunks who have tattooed entire scenes from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* on their bodies and have elevated Jack and Sally into the pantheon of cinema's great romantic couples, *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* is the official unofficial sequel to their favorite movie. It's got all the right things going for it: Tim Burton's elaborately creepy visual sense, Danny Elfman laying down his Brecht-light stylings, the herky-jerky stop-motion animation that gives it a sense of authenticity, and of course, more death and morbidity than you can shake a stick at. Heck, even the hero looks like Jack Skellington, just with a new head and suit.

And indeed, everything that made *Nightmare* a goth classic is present and accounted for in *Corpse Bride*—there's just less of it. Burton's visuals are more restrained, both in the land of the living (which is colorless) and in the land of the dead (colorful but claustrophobic); Elfman's songs and score are less memorable (which is possibly an unfair comparison to make, as *Nightmare*'s score is one of the best of the last 20 years); and even the twitching stop-motion has been smoothed out with some computer tweaking. There's nothing wrong or bad here; it's just not as much as one would hope for.

What does work is the corpse bride in question, who the film's hapless hero Victor (Depp) accidentally weds while rehearsing his vows to a real live girl. The bride, played by Carter, is vivacious and funny, and disturbingly sexy for a stop-motion puppet, even if one arm is all bones and a maggot that sounds like Peter Lorre keeps popping out of her eye socket. She's the one anyone with sense would choose. Expect her to pop up in tattoo form really soon now.

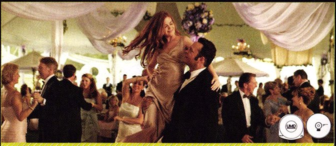
SCORE 3.5/5

THE ARISTOCRATS

[Every comedian you've ever heard of]

One hundred comedians tell the same joke, over and over and over again. This is funny? Well, it depends on the joke, and the joke in question here—the title is the joke's punch line—is unspeakably filthy (or almost unspeakably filthy, since it does indeed get spoken), and it's the one comedians tell each other to see who does it best. No matter what, after you've seen this film, you'll never think of Bob Saget the same way again.

SCORE 4|5



WEDDING CRASHERS

[Vince Vaughn, Owen Wilson]

There's simply no reason on God's green earth that *Wedding Crashers* should have made $200 million at the box office. $100 million? Sure, why not? Like all really successful recent comedies, this one has at least two of the Vaughn/Wilson/Stiller comedy triumvirate; you could show a movie of these three silently eating pizza and it would gross $80 million in a walk, so tacking on an additional $20 million for them acting is no stretch. But $200 million? No way. So what happened? My theory is that after so many years of constrained PG-13-ness, audiences were so hungry for an unapologetically R-rated comedy (sex! ~~Boobs!~~ Cursing!) that they overly rewarded this one. Don't get me wrong: Watching Vaughn and Wilson charm their way into weddings and then into the bosom of a Kennedy-like family is all very amusing. But not that amusing.

SCORE 3.5|5

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

[Ralph Fiennes, Rachel Weisz]

Every now and again the movie industry likes to remind itself that it can create gripping entertainment for people with triple-digit IQs. And when it does rouse itself so, you get something like this, a surpassingly smart and angry film in which Fiennes is a British diplomat whose wife's murder in Africa is just the beginning of some very nasty business down the continent. You can actually feel your brain grow as you watch this. Wild.

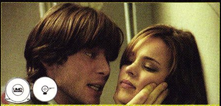
SCORE 4|5

HUSTLE & FLOW

[Terrence Howard, Ludacris]

It's a story as old as the movies: An ambitious hustler (Howard) tries to make a break for himself in the entertainment industry even as his old life clings to him. In his case, however, he's a pimp/dealer who wants to be a rapper. Which, you know, is a little different than working in a steel mill. The story's old, but the take is fresh, and Howard mirrors his character by trying to make the most of his chances. Good job.

SCORE 4|5



RED EYE

[Rachel McAdams, Cillian Murphy]

Show of hands, here: If the guy sitting next to you on an airplane was named Jackson Rippner, wouldn't you, you know, move your seat? Good, good. Rachel McAdams, however, would not, and suddenly we have a film—and a pretty sharp thriller to boot, as McAdams deals with an increasingly absurd situation by staying totally grounded and realistic. Why, she's a lot like Jodie Foster in that other film about a plane! Only hotter. So much hotter.

SCORE 3.5|5

FLIGHTPLAN

[Jodie Foster, Peter Sarsgaard]

A woman loses her child on a plane—or did she? Time to check the overhead bin. Jodie Foster has the enviable ability to make any film she's in seem smarter and more logical than it is; that's an excellent thing for *Flightplan*, because the moment you step out of the film and ask yourself whether the plot genuinely makes sense, the whole thing collapses like a jostled soufflé. But when Foster's on the case, man, you believe it.

SCORE 3.5|5

THE LEGEND OF ZORRO

[Antonio Banderas, Catherine Zeta-Jones]

It takes some doing to make Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, two of the most lushly beautiful people in the universe, seem like people you'd want to gnaw off your own leg to escape from, but guess what? This film manages it. It's an accomplishment of a sort, but probably not the one intended. What a shame, because I liked the first *Zorro* movie with these two just fine. Maybe you can just freeze-frame and ogle your fantasy of choice.

SCORE 2|5

TRANSPORTER 2

[Jason Statham, Kate Nauta]

The Transporter was not a film I thought demanded a sequel; Jason Statham driving and killing does not a franchise make. But no one asked me, and here we are, with Statham doing more driving and more killing in a somewhat more ridiculous fashion than the last time. Pointless? Check. Violent? Check. Stupid? Check! Kind of fun? Well, yeah. It's hard to fault this film for being loud and stupid: What else could it be?

SCORE 3|5

DVD RELEASES

January 3
Wedding Crashers
January 10
The Constant Gardener
Hustle & Flow
Red Eye
Transporter 2
January 24
The Aristocrats
Flightplan
January 31
The Legend of Zorro
Tim Burton's Corpse Bride

UMD RELEASES

January 3
Dumb and Dumber
Elektra
Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle
Rush Hour
Rush Hour 2
Wedding Crashers
January 10
Hustle & Flow
MirrorMask
Red Eye
Transporter 2
January 24
The Island

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REVVING UP THE PLAYSTATION WAYBACK MACHINE

90

2K5 IN PICTURES

A VISUAL LOOK BACK AT A VERY BIG YEAR

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VIDEOGAME SEX

HOT COFFEE WASN'T THE FIRST, OR THE LAST

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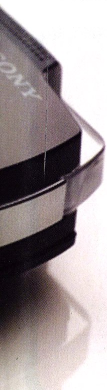
Everything new is old again.
100 BEHIND THE GAME: GUITAR HERO
We chat with the folks behind the rockingest PS2 game yet.
102 ESSENTIAL MILITARY GAMES
Fall in for a roll call of some of the most crucial military-themed titles on PS2.
104 THE BEST GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED
You haven't seen everything the PS1 has to offer until you've seen these Japanese classics.

Year No. 10 in the PlayStation world was a big one. System launch? Check. Genre-defining game releases? Check. Hardware announcements, lawsuits, monopoly-making deals? Check, check, check. Come with us as we revisit the highs and lows.

2K5

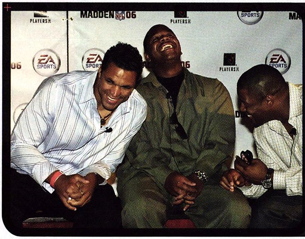
THE YEAR IN PICTURES

EVENTS THAT ROCKED THE PLAYSTATION WORLD IN 2005



1/5

Kaz Hirai and Xzibit show off the PSP's musical abilities at Sony's Consumer Electronics Show press conference. Notably absent from the presentation: any information on price or release date.



1/17

On the heels of its agreements with the NFL and Arena Football League, Electronic Arts announces an exclusive 15-year deal with ESPN. Experts estimate the agreement is worth $850 million in cash and advertising commitments. Here, Tony Gonzalez, Byron Leftwich, and Michael Strahan hang out at ESPN Zone in New York City at the *Madden NFL 06* launch event.

1/31

Responding to EA's football monopoly, Take-Two announces that it has negotiated with Major League Baseball to be the only third-party developer allowed to make licensed baseball games.

2/3

Sony finally gives gamers the info they've been waiting months for: The PSP will have a price tag of $249.99 and be on sale starting March 24.

2/22

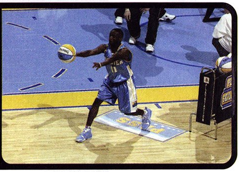
After a number of delays and feature cuts, *Gran Turismo 4* finally reaches stores shelves, to underwhelming response.

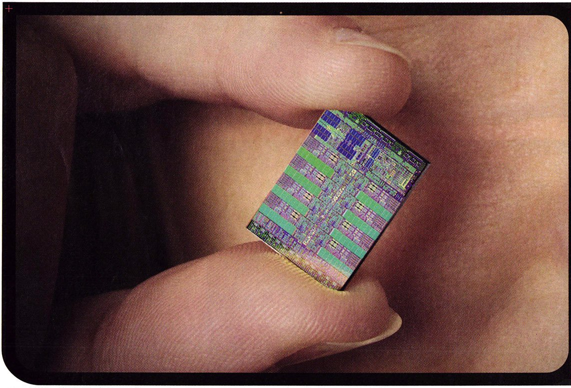
3/1

Dante redeems himself by renouncing his foppish ways with the release of *Devil May Cry 3*.

3/22

The NBA announces that it will not partner with one company but rather share the love with (and take a cut of the profits from) the major third-party publishers. Here, Earl Boykins of the Denver Nuggets participates in the PlayStation Skills Challenge.



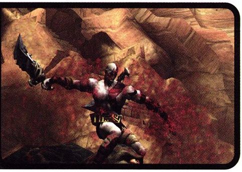


2/7

At a joint press conference, Sony, IBM, and Toshiba unveil the architecture of the Cell processor, which will power the PlayStation 3. Attendees smile and nod and pretend that they have the vaguest concept of how this thing actually works.

3/22

God of War arrives in stores, providing excellent sales and setting a trend of chains seared to wrists (yeah, we're looking at you, Dark Prince).



3/24

The PSP is released with midnight launch parties on both coasts. Here, a happy San Francisco buyer holds up his new purchase.

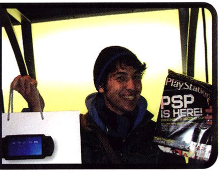


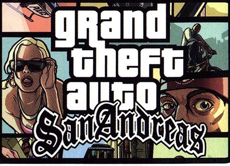
Image of Earl Boykins courtesy of gettyimages.

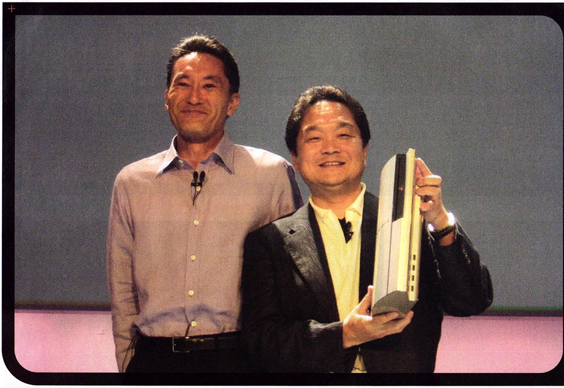
3/29

Sony is ordered to pay $90.7 million to Immersion for patent infringement on the rumble technology used by the DualShock controller. Sony files an appeal, which is still in process as of press time.

7/20

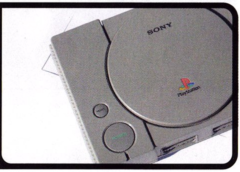
After an embarrassing incident with some Hot Coffee, Rockstar finally confesses that there is hidden code in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* depicting digitized sexual acts. The ESRB changes the game's rating, making it the first AO game on PS2.





5/16

To everyone's surprise, Sony unveils the PlayStation 3 at its E3 press conference. The presentation is a huge hit, becoming the talk of the rest of the show and prompting debate about whether the game footage shown was totally legit or totally faked.

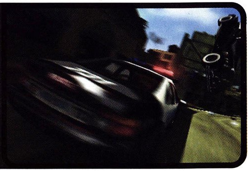


9/9

The first PlayStation marks 10 years since coming to North America. Happy birthday, little buddy.

9/13

Automobile accidents increase tenfold as *Burnout Revenge* and *Burnout Legends* hit store shelves.

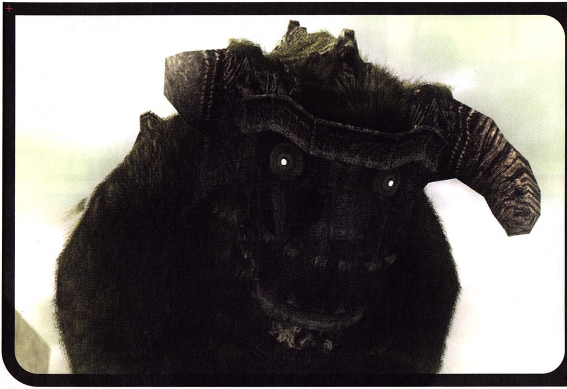


9/16

Hideo Kojima (pictured second from left) and his trailer for *Metal Gear Solid 4* on PlayStation 3 steal show at TGS.

9/29

The PlayStation is awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Technology and Advanced New Media.



10/18

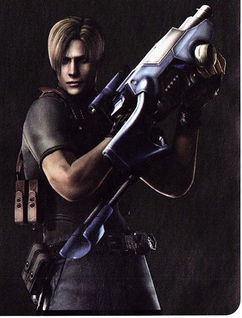
Fumito Ueda proves that he isn't just a one-hit wonder with *Ico*, as *Shadow of the Colossus* captivates gamers around the globe.

10/11

SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs is released and immediately sets a new record for simultaneous users online. The new 32-player battles no doubt help a bit.

10/24

Grand Theft Auto is made to fit in the palm of your hand with the release of *Liberty City Stories.*



10/25

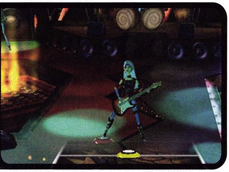
The PS2 port of *Resident Evil 4* comes out, thereby rendering your GameCube unnecessary.

10/25

Soul Calibur III's release shows us that yes, the soul indeed still burns.

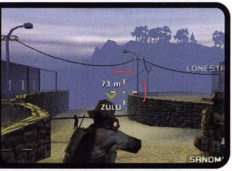
10/26

PlayStation 2, the little Emotion engine that could, celebrates its fifth birthday in North America.



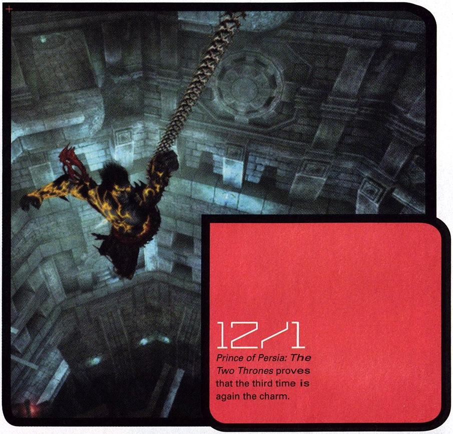
11/7

Guitar Hero brings out the rock star in all of us. Axes are slung, goats are thrown, and jaws drop in astonishment at the ridiculous complexity of "Bark at the Moon" on expert.



11/8

Portable warfare abounds in *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo.*



12/1

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones proves that the third time is again the charm.

PS1-DERLAND

2005: BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

By Jeremy Parish

When he's not trying to reclaim his vanished youth with obsolete games, Jeremy works as 1UP.com's features editor and charming mascot. Check out his blog at toastyfrog.1UP.com.

Looking back at how all things PlayStation fared in 2005, I can't help but find myself filled with a sense of nostalgia. Not nostalgia for 2005, mind you, but for all the times we've seen these headlines before. The more things change, the more they stay the same and all that.

1. SONY'S NEW CONSOLE GOES TOE-TO-TOE WITH NINTENDO

Ten years ago, Sony tossed its hat into a ring dominated by Nintendo—console gaming—and walked away the victor. This year, the company challenged Nintendo for control of the portable market with the PSP. Suddenly, handhelds became cool and Nintendo is now often dismissed as an aging, out-of-touch dinosaur. Sound familiar? The one difference: Nintendo's actually holding its own quite nicely this time around.

2. PERIPHERAL ABANDONMENT PROMPTS FF DEPARTURE

Sony's decision to stop manufacturing the original PS2 in favor of 2004's new slimline model meant no more HDD support. It wasn't the most brutal betrayal of 2005—that honor goes to Capcom for ditching *Steel Battalion* and its $200 controller. But it's definitely the most significant, as the main customers hurt by this decision are *Final Fantasy XI* owners. In response, Square Enix quickly decided to shift its *FFXI* support to the Xbox 360. *Final Fantasy*'s defection to PS1 because of hardware issues was a major reason the N64 bombed, so Sony had better hope history doesn't repeat itself.

3. METAL GEAR DEMO STEALS THE SHOW

The highlight of E3 2000 was an amazing *Metal Gear Solid 2* trailer that had us convinced that the PlayStation 2 was as powerful as Ken Kutaragi's hyperbole promised. It wasn't, but we didn't find that out until we were out $300 and Sega's worthy Dreamcast had been crushed by the PS2's hype. Fast-forward to this year's Tokyo Game Show, where an amazing *MGS4* trailer for the PlayStation 3 blew us all away (and was in no way diminished by the fact that Snake looks *exactly* like my grandfather now). Nothing on display for the Xbox 360 even came close. But word on the street is that the 360 is just as powerful as the PS3—will it avoid the Dreamcast's fate? Maybe Hideo Kojima's recent acknowledgment that the trailer could easily have run on the 360 will curtail the rampant fanboyism. But probably not.

4. GRANDSTANDING OPPORTUNIST HATES GAMES, GAMERS

As long teens are willing to fork over money for new forms of media their parents don't understand, activists will rise up to crusade against that media. It used to be Joseph Lieberman putting the hate on gaming. Before that, Al Gore's wife, Tipper Gore, advocated warning labels on music. And in the '50s, Fredric Wertham nearly killed comic books by calling Batman and Robin gay. In comparison, the latest bugaboo (blustery Florida lawyer Jack Thompson) seems laughable. In fact, he may have worked himself into obsolescence already. But don't worry—like the Hydra, two more self-aggrandizing politicians will rise to take his place.

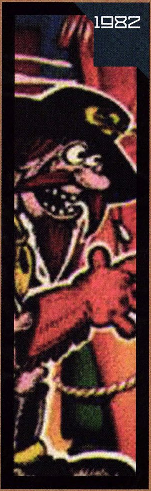
> "SNAKE LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE MY GRANDFATHER."

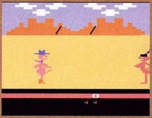
So yeah, 2005 felt pretty familiar. Here's to 2006: Bound to be another new year full of the same old crap. Cheers!

THE SECRET HISTORY OF VIDEOGAME SEX

BY ROBERT ASHLEY

WHILE JACK THOMPSON AND HILLARY CLINTON MIGHT THINK THAT SEXUAL CONTENT IN VIDEOGAMES BEGAN WITH HOT COFFEE, SEX HAS BEEN A SELLING POINT IN GAMES SINCE THE DAYS OF THE ATARI 2600. HERE ARE A FEW HOT (AND NOT SO HOT) MILESTONES IN THE SEEDY HISTORY OF SEX IN CONSOLE VIDEOGAMES.

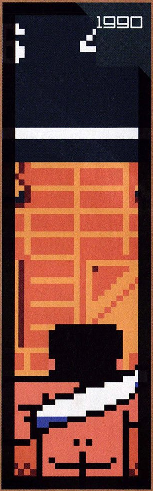


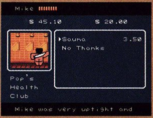


custer's revenge

Atari 2600

Ask yourself if this premise would fly in a videogame today: General George Armstrong Custer, sporting a visible erection, dodges arrows across an open prairie, making his way toward a naked, hog-tied Native American woman. When he reaches the woman, he forces her to have sex with him, graphically. Granted, the graphics in question are laughably crude, the giant, Crayola-colored pixels barely able to suggest nudity. A modern remake of *Custer's Revenge* would surely cause a political riot. C'mon, Rockstar....



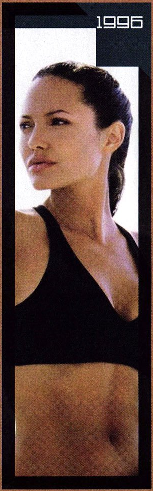


Mike was very uptight and

river city ransom

Nintendo Entertainment System

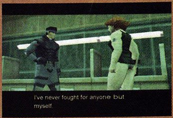
This quirky brawler endeared itself to a generation with its bizarre minimalls full of power-ups and goods for sale. You're in for a surprise, however, if you decide to take a time-out at the local sauna. The subsequent animation of strapping, albeit square, men features more man-butt than a Mel Gibson movie.



tomb raider

PS1

There they were—right on the cover—like neck-and-neck rivals in a zeppelin race: enormous, triangular, reality-defying breasts. Lara Croft, with her martini glass figure, pistols in both hands, and seductive British accent, was born. For the first time ever, a videogame character was openly thought sexy. Swimsuit calendars, bogus nudity cheats, and Angelina Jolie movies followed. It was the beginning of the boob era.



I've never fought for anyone but myself.

metal gear solid

PS1

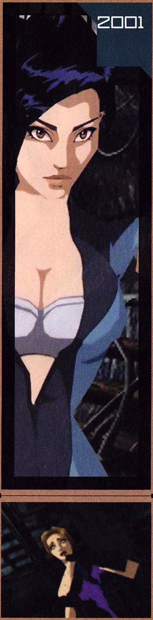
Metal Gear's female supersoldier Meryl was no teenage boy's fantasy pinup, but her skintight tank top suggested a softer side. And if you happened to rush quickly into a certain bathroom during a certain notorious scene, you could see that softer side—albeit still mostly clothed.

2000
TINA
BASS
15 20
©TECMO, LTD. 1996,1999

Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore

PS2

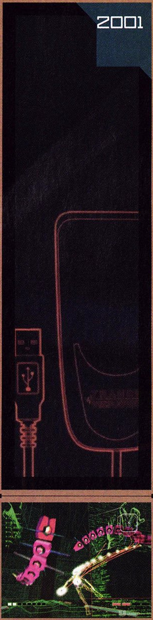
If *Tomb Raider* invented the polygonal boob fetish, *Dead or Alive* perfected it. Packed to the brim with 3D kung fu–fighting blow-up dolls, it's a game obsessed with the little details, namely, the physics of realistic bouncing breasts. Optional costumes encourage a kind of testosterone-injected game of dress-up—kinda creepy, really.



Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix

PS1

Retro Helix features not one but two sexy (if you're into the blocky cartoon style) protagonists, Hana and Rain. Here's the thing: They're lovers, and they totally make out. The *Basic Instinct* of videogames, *Helix* was the first (and only) game to feature a lesbian lead, and one of many mediocre games to sell itself on novel sex acts and partial nudity.

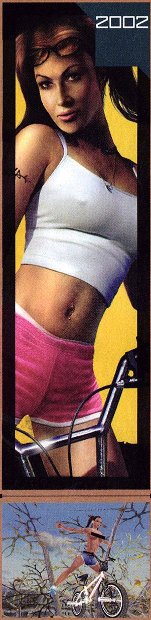


Rez

Vibrator Attachment

PS2 (Japan)

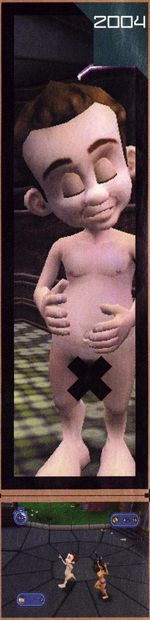
In America, the experimental music game *Rez* was limited to a small batch of discs, but lucky Japanese gamers got the option to add on a strange peripheral, the trance vibrator. While not explicitly a sex toy, the small USB attachment buzzed along to the beat of *Rez*'s trance music, which built slowly in each level toward an ecstatic climax. The attachment inspired many adventurous female gamers to go where games had never gone before.



BMX XXX

PS2

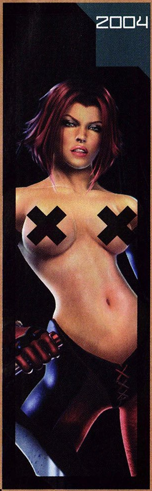
Sex doesn't always sell. Hoping to capitalize on the growing market for boobs, *BMX XXX* gave extreme-sports fans what they never asked for, topless female bike riders. And if the combination of bikes and breasts wasn't weird enough, developer Z-Axis threw in a set of unlockable striptease videos.



Leisure Suit Larry

PS2

The *Leisure Suit Larry* games for the PC were practically a rite of passage for giggling teenage boys of a certain era, but *Magna Cum Laude* was the first title in the series to make it to a console. Basically a collection of sex-themed minigames with humor along the lines of a teenage sex comedy's (think *American Pie*), *Magna Cum Laude* answers the long-pondered question, What would it be like to control a sperm cell in a game?



Bloodrayne bares it all

Playboy

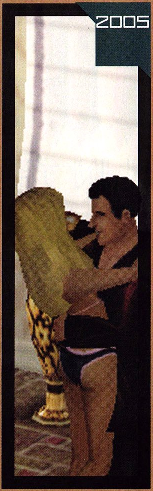
Less than 10 years after Lara Croft inspired a generation of virtual sex goddesses, the October 2004 issue of *Playboy* ran a pictorial featuring the red-headed star of the *BloodRayne* series in all her topless glory. It was a brilliant promotional stunt for *BloodRayne 2* and another big first for game characters.

COPS ARRIVAL 05:26

GTA: San Andreas

PS2

Then there was a little thing called Hot Coffee. Infuriating cultural conservatives and opportunity-sniffing politicians everywhere, news of a hack that lets players engage in full-on sex spread like wildfire. After a series of dates in the game, leading man CJ is asked inside by his girlfriend for a hot cup of joe. They quickly retire to the boom boom room, where intercourse plays out like a one-off rhythm game. Of course, anyone who's actually seen it will tell you that the Ken-on-Barbie action is less than erotic. Few have seen CJ's "O" face and come away with their libidos intact.

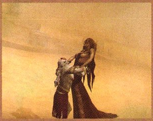


PLAYBOY
1/24
Snap
Wardrobe
Pose
End

Playboy: The Mansion

PS2

If there's a lesson to be learned from the first ever *Playboy*-licensed game, it's that Americans won't stand for simulated sex in their ultraviolent games, but they don't mind it one bit from good old Hef. Yes, *The Mansion* has its share of digital doin' it (while partially clothed), along with a host of decidedly unsexy management tasks.



God of War

PS2

With topless female characters in plentiful supply and a sex minigame not unlike *GTA*'s notorious Hot Coffee (though, without actually *showing* anything), *God of War* has created none of the controversy you might expect from the current hysterical atmosphere surrounding games and sex. Perhaps graphical quality is the key to acceptance of sexual themes in games.

女優
インフォ
AVデビューにサッチ

Porn UMDs

PSP

Though PSP owners began loading their memory sticks with porn scant hours after the system was released, the era of game-console porn began in earnest when Japanese video publishers started offering fully licensed UMD pornographic movies. The U.S. adult film industry can't be far behind.

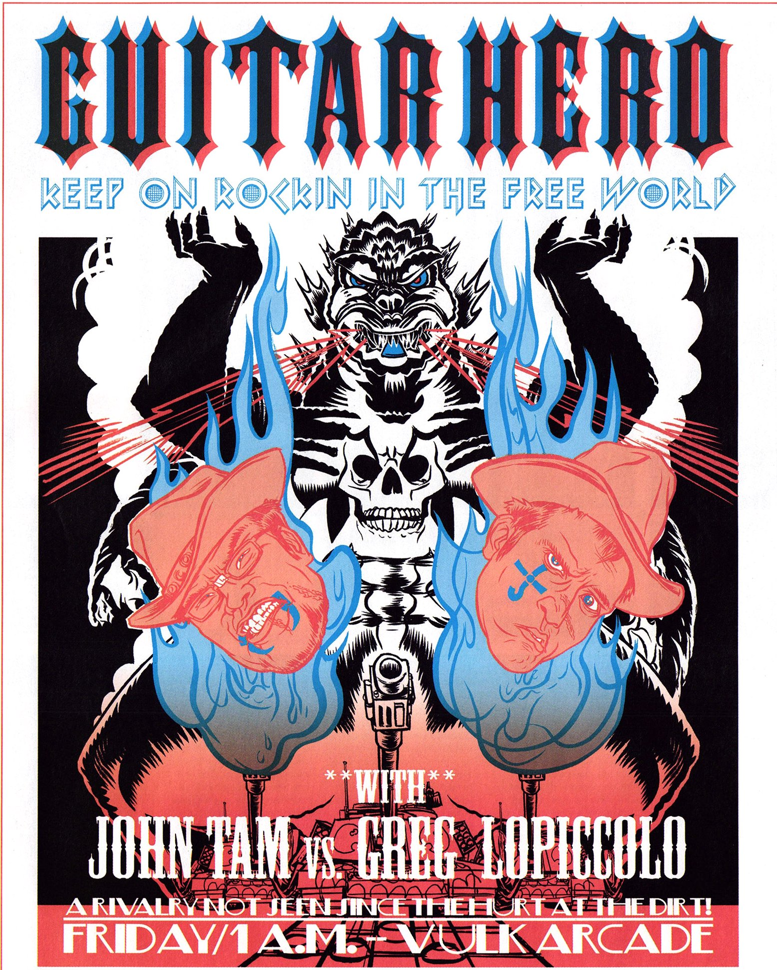
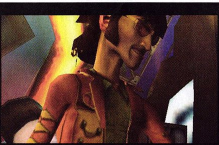

GUITAR HERO
KEEP ON ROCKIN IN THE FREE WORLD
WITH
JOHN TAM VS. GREG LOPICCOLO
A RIVALRY NOT SEEN SINCE THE HURT AT THE DIRT!
FRIDAY/1 A.M. - VULK ARCADE

Illustration by Nathan Fox



THE VERDICT IS IN: GUITAR HERO IS ONE OF THE MOST ENTERTAINING MUSIC-RHYTHM GAMES OUT THERE. KNOWING WE'D HAVE TO GET IN BEFORE THE GROUPIES STARTED LINING UP, WE TALKED WITH GREG LOPICCOLO, VICE PRESIDENT OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AT DEVELOPER HARMONIX MUSIC, AND JOHN TAM, PRODUCER AT PUBLISHER REDOCTANE, TO GET THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE GAME NOW THAT IT'S OUT THE DOOR.

OPM As of this writing, *Guitar Hero* has a Game Rankings average score of 93 percent. How do you feel about the response to the game?

GREG LOPICCOLO We are totally thrilled. Everyone on the team is a huge rock fan, so we were just making the game we wanted to play, but we didn't know if our audience would get it until it hit the stores. We're psyched that lots of people share our adolescent rock fantasies.

JOHN TAM The response has been overwhelming, actually. Contacts all over the game industry have told consistent stories of how departmental productivity has been reduced to a crawl because of *Guitar Hero* dueling-guitar sessions. We are really happy at the critical success because of the risks involved with building such an ambitious title.

OPM Why do you think Konami never brought *Guitar Freaks* to the United States? And do you think it might now that *Guitar Hero* has proven so successful?

JT *Guitar Freaks* really does tap into the rock scene in Japan and feels to me like a completely different kind of product. The comparisons are only on the surface. People that play both know that they are really different. Since *Guitar Freaks* is loaded with Konami house-band music, it may not strike a similar chord with an American audience unless the product sees many changes.

OPM Tell us a little bit about the process of choosing a song list. How did you decide which songs made the final cut?

GL We knew we wanted the core to be split between classic rock songs and some newer songs so that everyone would have at least a few songs that they were familiar with. We're hoping that some of our younger players will get turned on to music they perhaps didn't know about, like Blue Oyster Cult and Edgar Winter.

OPM How did the "Be a *Guitar Hero*" contest turn out for you?

GL We got quite a few submissions, which ranged in quality from... odd...to a number of really good, legit songs.

JT We narrowed the final list to about four very strong candidates. I personally could have gone with any of them and believe that they would all have been very playable. In the end we decided to go with the song that was loaded with personality and playability and worked well with the aesthetics and attitude presented in *Guitar Hero*.

GL The final choice was unanimous between the RedOctane and Harmonix teams, though; "Cheat on the Church" by Graveyard BBQ is just so rock, it was an easy call.

OPM Developing a game that requires a specialized controller is quite a risk. How do you balance the need for the special controller with the fact that it effectively limits the potential audience?

GL We didn't worry too much about limiting our audience. It does make the game more expensive, which I'm sure affects sales somewhat, but you really need the guitar controller for the game to work.

JT The restrictions of being on a specialized controller are totally outweighed by the experience that *Guitar Hero* provides as a whole.

OPM How did you adjust the difficulty between the different levels? Is it just a matter of adding more notes for the harder difficulties?

GL The harder levels have more notes and chords, and use more buttons so that you have to shift your hand in hard and expert songs to cover all the positions. The higher difficulties are also less forgiving of missed notes; you'll get booted quicker if you screw up. We have found that the game feels more like playing real guitar at the harder difficulty levels, since there is more of a one-to-one correspondence between notes you play and notes in the original part.

OPM Is it even possible to beat the game on expert?

JT Most of the QA staff has cleared the game on expert. It's not super impossible for fans of the genre but may be near impossible for most regular gamers.

GL So get back to practicing!

OPM Can playing *Guitar Hero* make you a better guitarist in real life?

> "WE DIDN'T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT LIMITING OUR AUDIENCE."

JT A few of the guitarists close to the product talk about using it to practice strength training and fingering exercises....

GL It's not really intended as anything more than a fun game, but if you've never played any guitar, it will probably help train your hands to function independently. I'm guessing that someone who played a lot of *Guitar Hero* would have a slight head start on learning real guitar. I wouldn't want to oversell it, though.

OPM Did you consider offering a bass option for two-player?

GL We talked about this, but it would have been more work than we had time for. It would be cool, though, and will be considered if we end up doing any sort of sequel. There are some awesome bass parts on some of those songs.

OPM There will be a sequel, right? RIGHT?

JT We'll let you know as soon as we're ready to announce our next deal. I really love this game, so I don't want to stop working on it.

OPM And what about, say, a drum game?

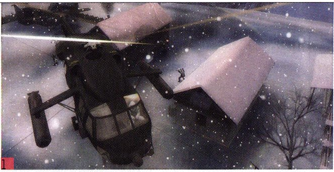
JT Drums are a natural progression of what people may want. Air guitar and air drums are part of our culture. With *Guitar Hero* we wanted to make something that would tap into the rock culture.

GL It would be a blast to work on a drum game. We can't say much more about it at this point, though.

9 ESSENTIAL MILITARY GAMES

NO NEED TO ENLIST

Looking to express your patriotism without putting your real-life ass on the line? These nine games will let you manifest your fighting spirit without leaving the comfort of your living room.



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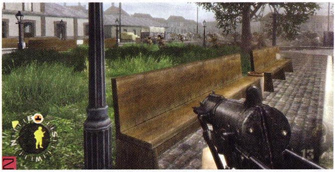

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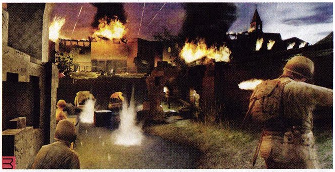


3

BATTLEFIELD 2: MODERN COMBAT 1

PUB. EA Games OPM SCORE 4

The PC blockbuster finally reaches consoles in this vast online shooter. Teamwork is key, both online and off (where you jump from character to character to perform different tasks), but the real hook is the ability to hop into any vehicle you see and crash it immediately into a building, a telephone pole, or the ground. Or, you know, drive it around in a way that's actually helpful to your teammates. Whatever works for you.

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD 2

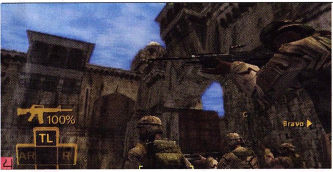
PUB. Ubisoft OPM SCORE 4

Ubisoft's lush first-person tactical shooter returns with more World War II action than you can shake a green, leafy stick at. With significantly more of a tactical bent than its competitors, *Earned in Blood* lets you zoom way out to get a general's-eye view of the action and plan your flanking maneuvers accordingly—but there's no shortage of ground-level combat either. Combine this with some of the most beautifully detailed environments of any game of its type and you've got a relatively new take on the genre.

CALL OF DUTY 2: BIG RED ONE 3

PUB. Activision OPM SCORE 4

While it's not a vast improvement over its predecessor, *Big Red One*'s forays into new WWII FPS territory (like wandering around a bomber in flight and manning different stations) make it an easy choice for the list. Also of note is the excellent characterization and scripting; while the game is awfully linear, it definitely gets across the feeling of being a part of something much bigger than yourself—and the intensely varied gameplay doesn't hurt either.



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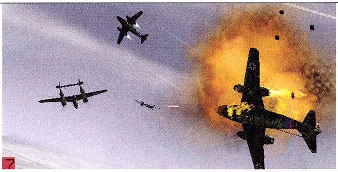

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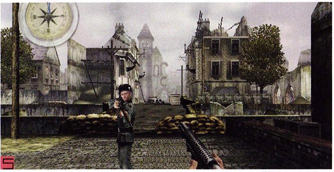

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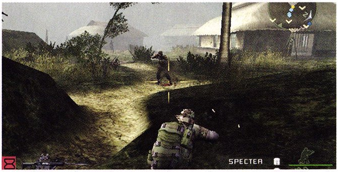

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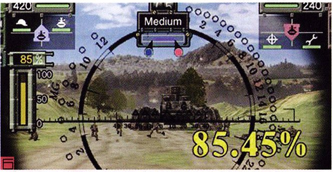

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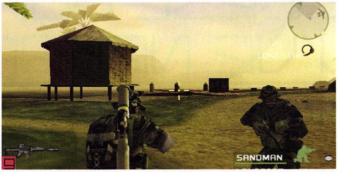


9

PlayStation
ISSUE 101
DVD

PLAY IT

If you want to try *SOCOM 3*s goodness for yourself, pop in this month's demo disc and give it a test drive.

FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR

4

PUB. THQ OPM SCORE 4

A modern-war strategy game for the truly hardcore, *Full Spectrum Warrior* was initially developed for the actual U.S. Army to use in training. Yeah, so it's pretty serious about realism (though the difficulty is definitely toned down from the original incarnation). There's no need for an itchy trigger finger here; in spite of looking like a third-person shooter, this is most definitely a strategy title, and it rewards careful thought much more than quick reflexes.

MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE

5

PUB. EA Games OPM SCORE 5

The series that launched the WWII craze makes its first appearance on the PS2. While one is justified in complaining about the linearity of the game or the stupidity of the enemies, there's no denying the power of the opening scene, which puts players in a landing boat during the assault of Omaha Beach on D-Day. The most recent sequel, *European Assault*, may be a technically superior game, but few shooters are as emotionally powerful as *Frontline*.

RING OF RED

6

PUB. Konami OPM SCORE 4

We're just going to keep bringing this one up until Konami caves and makes a sequel. This strategy game puts players in an alternate-history world where Hitler—and his diesel-powered *giant fighting robots*—won World War II. A fascinating story, engrossing gameplay, and plenty of challenge make this one of the best strategy titles on the PS2. Best of all is the amazing incorporation of mechs into actual WWII footage, making the premise of the game seem that much more plausible.

SECRET WEAPONS OVER NORMANDY

7

PUB. LucasArts OPM SCORE 4

The sequel to LucasArts' critically acclaimed *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe* (arriving a staggering 12 years after the original) puts you in an area of WWII less heavily traveled by recent games: the air war. Excellent controls, cinematic presentation, and lifelike dialogue help put you in the cockpit of a variety of period birds as you do your best to punch holes in the wings of enemies variously referred to as "Jerries," "krauts," and "sausage scoffers."

SOCOM: U.S. NAVY SEALS FIRETEAM BRAVO

8

PUB. Sony CEA OPM SCORE 4.5

We thought that *SOCOM*'s transition to the PSP would result in a shallower, dumbed-down experience. Turns out we were dead wrong; the game is every bit as involving as its PS2 brethren—though definitely a bit more fast-paced and visceral due to the lock-on targeting and shorter missions. Most impressive is the excellent online play, especially the freeze-tag-like captive mode and solid implementation of voice chat with the new PSP headset.

SOCOM 3: U.S. NAVY SEALS

9

PUB. Sony CEA OPM SCORE 5

SOCOM is definitely one of the best—and most realistic—military series in gaming. But with *SOCOM 3*, developer Zipper Interactive dialed down the realism just enough to make the game more accessible and entertaining in single-player mode. And oh yeah, the designers also doubled the team size for online play, allowing a staggering 32 players to drive the new vehicles around the enormous maps. It's our pick for the best of a very, very good series.

SONY
PlayStation

The Best Games You've Never Played

THINK YOU'VE SEEN EVERYTHING THE PS1 HAD TO OFFER? TRY LOOKING OVERSEAS

Maybe it seems a little silly amidst all the hype for PlayStation 3 to spend time dwelling on the first generation of Sony's hardware, but we're of a mind that a great game is a great game, regardless of when it was made. There's still a lot of entertainment to be squeezed out of the PlayStation library, especially if you missed some gems the first time around. But what happens once you've finally tracked down that $100 copy of *Suikoden II* and mastered every job class in *Dragon Warrior VII*? Fear not—there's still life in your PS1. All you have to do is look overseas to Japan, where there are dozens of good (sometimes great!) games that never made it to the United States.

Interested? Check out these recommended titles and start hunting—we recommend eBay (www.ebay.com) and online import shops like National Console Support (www.ncsx.com) and Play Asia (www.play-asia.com). Just remember that you'll need a console capable of playing Japanese titles; any of these sites should be able to help you out with that, too. | *Jeremy Parish*

KONAMI
GRADIUS 外伝
1

ハームフルパーク
HARMFUL PARK
2

shooters

1 Gradius Gaiden

While the existence of *Gradius V* makes it difficult to state with authority that *Gradius Gaiden* is the best entry in Konami's long-running series, the game certainly won't go down without a good fight. In many ways this is the ultimate *Gradius* game: crazy hard, packed with options (and Options), and brimming with clever ideas and loving nods to the series' history. There's the multipart Moai boss, the crazy shoot-the-core showdown, and, of course, the battle through the opening stage of the original *Gradius* as it's devoured by a black hole in your wake. It's a love letter to fans, although Konami clearly believes in tough love, and it's not afraid to send your self-esteem through the shredder: It's a damn hard game. Fortunately, *Gaiden* was recently rereleased in a budget reprint edition, so unless you're anal about packaging, you should have no trouble finding a copy on the cheap.

ZANAC X ZANAC
3

シリーズ第2弾
アーケード完全移植!!
DODONPACHI
怒首領蜂
4

2 Harmful Park

Are you one of those people who gets pissed off by cute things? Then you're in luck—*Harmful Park* is crammed full of 'em...and offers players the cathartic opportunity to blow them all to pieces.

3 Zanac X Zanac

The last game release from shooter gods Compile, this is what you'd call a swan song; featuring both classic remakes and the shiny new *Zanac Neo*, *Zanac X Zanac* is shooting bliss. Word of warning, however: It's expensive (at press time, eBay listings were over $100), and the price continues to go up.

4 DoDonPachi

The prototypical "bullet hell" shooter, some people regard this version as a better port of the arcade game than the Saturn edition... despite the PlayStation's supposedly inferior 2D capabilities.

海腹川背・旬
second edition
5

HI 50000
2800
6

1UP
HIGH SCORE
2UP
LIFE
9

1
2
3
4
CAPCOM GENERATIONS
ESPAÑOL
CAPCOM
PlayStatio
10

platformers

5 Umihara Kawase Shun

This obscure gem (the semisequel to a Super Famicom game of the same name) could best be described as a 32-bit take on *Bionic Commando*, if the main character in Capcom's NES classic had been a young girl swinging her way through a delirious fever-dream via fishing pole. *Umihara* is all about climbing through surreal landscapes by making the most of a surprisingly detailed physics model. The heroine's grappling line is extremely elastic, which allows players to use an extraordinary number of techniques. Level-by-level progress seems straightforward, but once you master the fishing line and begin poking around the hidden corners of each level, you'll discover all sorts of secret exits to bonus stages—more than 50 in all. With its creepy fish-monsters and pastel-coated worlds, *Umihara* isn't for everyone...but fans of old-school action will love it.

6 Adventures of Little Ralph

A fairly rote sword-based action game, *Little Ralph* won't set anyone's world on fire with its gameplay but is worth tracking down for its lush hand-drawn animation.

7 Gunners Heaven

Could there be a more blatant rip-off of *Gunstar Heroes*? One of the earliest PlayStation games, *Gunners Heaven* is good, mindless fun, even if it lacks the manic genius of the game that so obviously inspired it.

collections

8 Konami Deluxe Packs

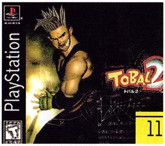
Konami did up its classics in fine style, offering reasonably priced collectors' sets of arcade originals like *Gradius*, *Salamander* (better known to Americans as *Life Force*), *Twinbee*, and *Parodius*. Like *Gradius Gaiden*, these games have been reissued in inexpensive slimline CD versions that are readily available from most importers. So what are you waiting for?

9 Namco Museum Encore

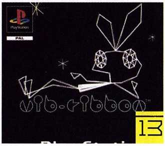
Americans were given five *Museums*, but Japan got a sixth: *Encore*. While it contains a few interesting novelties like *Wonder Momo*, the volume's real standout (*Rolling Thunder*) can easily be found in Namco's latest U.S.-published collections.

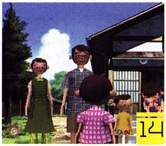
10 Capcom Generations

Of Capcom's five *Generations* discs, only one (the *Street Fighter II* disc) made it to the United States. Fortunately, the new *Capcom Classics Collection* contains every title to appear in *Generations*, making the 32-bit set useful only for completists.



BURNING Fes
12





fighters

11 Tobal 2

Tobal No. 1 was Square's first PlayStation game to be published in the United States and sold well mainly because people were slobbering over the packed-in *Final Fantasy VII* demo. While its untextured polygons look simplistic next to *Tekken*, it ran at a blistering 60 frames per second and featured tight gameplay, earning it a solid fan base. *Tobal 2* improves on its predecessor in countless ways, with better graphics, deeper gameplay, and a huge cast of characters. Even better is the compelling adventure mode, a fighting-game take on the *Mysterious Dungeon* series in which players battle their way through an increasingly challenging underground labyrinth. Unfortunately, this feature also killed the game's chances for a U.S. release; Square representatives claimed that the PlayStation's limited RAM made it impossible to fit English dialogue into the text boxes. Whatever the case may be, *Tobal 2* is one of the best 3D fighters around and is definitely worth tracking down.

12 Asuka 120% Burning Fest

Asuka 120% is another example of Japan's long-running fascination with jiggly all-girl fighting games. Unlike most, though, it's actually not too bad.

genre-bending genius

13 Vib-Ribbon

More wonderful insanity from the creator of *Parappa the Rapper*, *Vib-Ribbon* demonstrates Masaya Matsuura's fascination with blending music and gameplay in a wholly unique way. While its run-and-react action wasn't necessarily anything new or different in and of itself—players control Vibri, a shuddery rabbit-man, through a series of tricky obstacle courses—the technology behind the game makes it both fascinating and infinitely flexible. Game levels are generated on the fly based on the current music track—and while the built-in tunes are fine, just swap in any music CD to place Vibri in completely new challenges. The simple white-on-black graphics might be a turnoff for most Americans, but sheer invention and flexibility (and often surprisingly difficult action, depending on the current tune) make *Vib-Ribbon* a must-have for any collector.

14 Boku no Natsuyasumi

While it requires a pretty solid knowledge of Japanese, *Boku no Natsuyasumi* is a cult favorite for its warm *Wonder Years*–style story mixed with adventure-style gameplay.

15 Ore no Ryori

You might not think a goofily cartoonish game about working in the kitchen would be one of the most addictive games to be found on the PlayStation, but life's full of surprises that way. Highly recommended for fans of *Iron Chef* and minigames alike.

JOE RYBICKI has been an editor for *OPM* (and its predecessor, *PSX*) for nearly 10 years. And while he remembers the good old days, he'll take tomorrow any day.

IN MY DAY...

THE WOW FACTOR

A couple weeks ago, when the first Xbox 360s had been sent out to the press, I wandered over into 1UP's area of the office to find a salivating group clustered around *Project Gotham Racing 3*. They were very excited. But to me, it looked like, well...an Xbox game. Granted, a particularly *shiny* Xbox game—but an Xbox game.

Upon further examination I noticed a bunch of things that the original Xbox couldn't do as well: reflections, lighting, particles! (Personally, I was most impressed by the staggeringly realistic depiction of Las Vegas.) But it got me thinking: If I, a professional game journalist who's around videogames most every waking hour, have to really search to be able to see what the 360 does that the Xbox couldn't, how much harder is it going to be for the average consumer—or worse, the average parent—to understand what the fuss is all about?

I'm not trying to bash the 360 here. There's plenty about the 360 that excites me. It's just that most of those things are only exciting because I'm *already a gamer* and I know what to look for. Where's the "wow" factor? Where's the game that grabs the attention of anyone walking by—old, young, rich, poor, whatever—and says, "Yes, you must have me. I am the new era. I am the future"?

The PS1 had that. You put *Wipeout* next to any SNES game and you saw it instantly. And Nintendo had its revenge once the N64 showed up—you didn't have to squint to see what *Mario 64* was doing differently from PS1 and Saturn games. The Dreamcast? A smaller leap, but still noticeable.

But here's where things get interesting: Look at a screenshot of *Soul Calibur* on the Dreamcast. Then look at a screen of *Soul Calibur II* on the PS2. Then on the Xbox. Yes, if you saw the games running side by side you'd be able to pick up differences. But they're small. They're subtle. There's nothing that positively screams "next generation." So far, it's looking like a similar deal with the 360—and while the jury's still out on whether the footage shown so far is even legit, I wouldn't be terribly surprised to see the PS3 suffer a similar fate.

Now, obviously this hasn't hurt sales any. And I'm not saying that a new system needs to be light-years ahead of its competitors to be any good. All I'm saying is, I miss the days when you could walk into a videogame store and be just gobsmacked by new technology. But those days are probably gone forever. We appear to have hit the point of diminishing returns, the far side of the parabolic curve, where visual improvements can happen only incrementally.

And maybe that's a good thing. Maybe we're shifting back into a phase where developers will have to focus on design and gameplay more than "ooh, shiny pretty colors!" in order to distinguish their games from the competition's. A new game-design paradigm that emphasizes the innovative over the superficial? That'd be worth a "wow" for sure.

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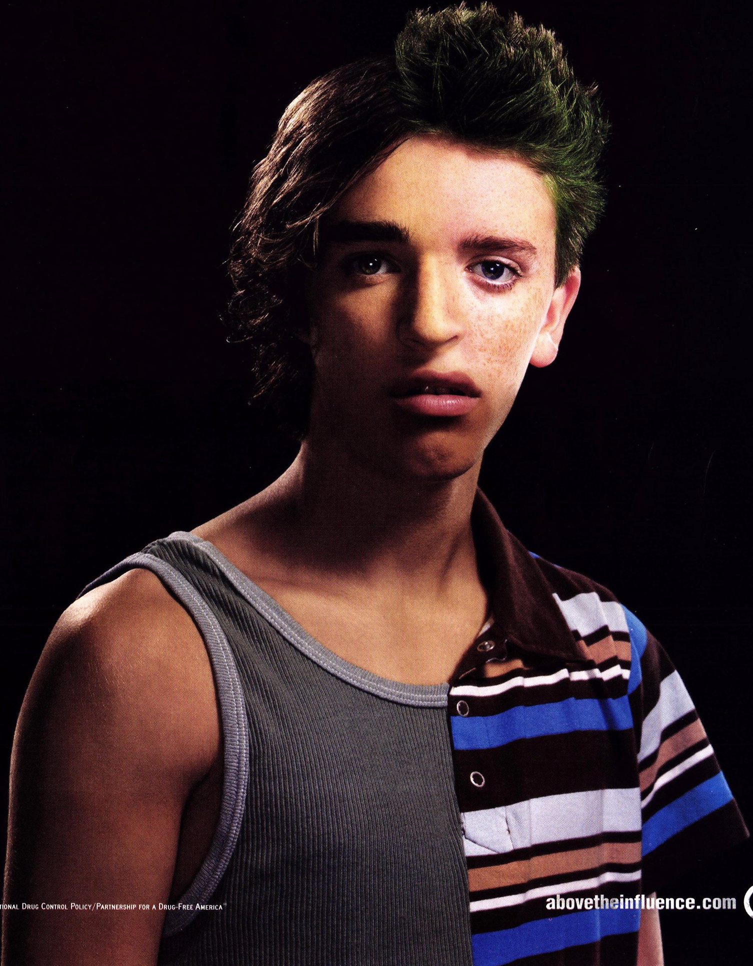

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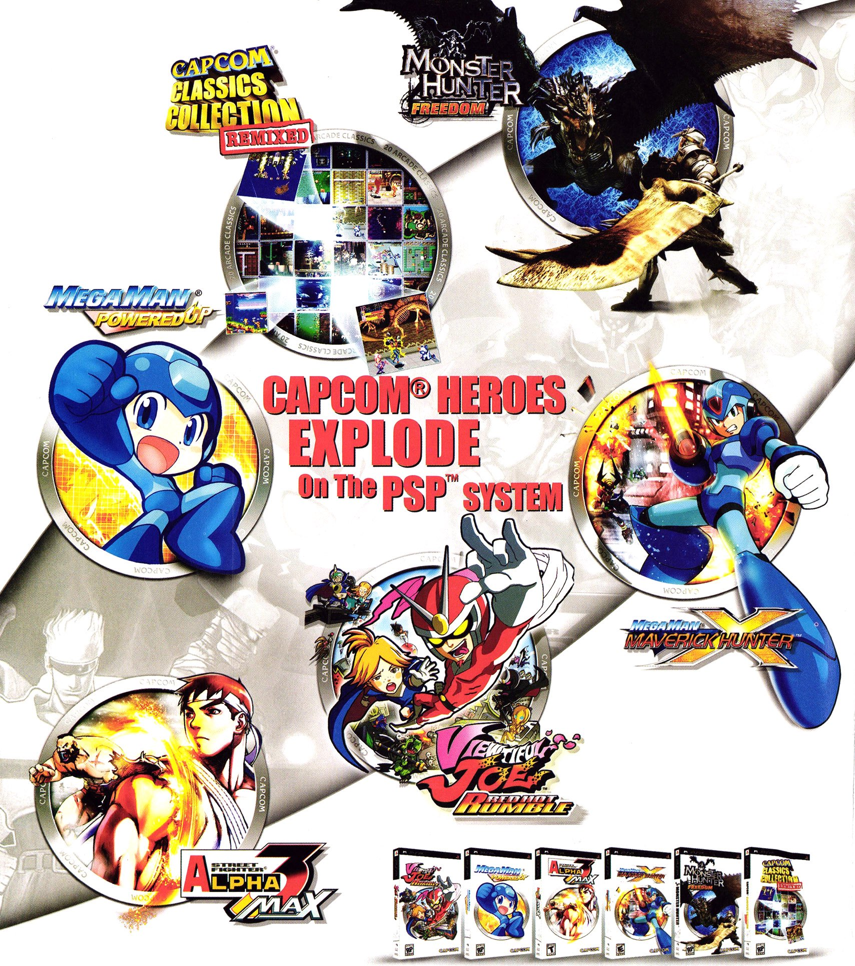
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